



ソードアート・オンライン8

アーリー・アンド・レイト

川原 礫

電撃文庫

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ソードアート・オンライン 8

アーリー・アンド・レイト

『圈内事件』——《SAO》中階層で、一人のプレイヤーが殺された。その殺害現場は、決してHPが減るはずのない《安全圏内》だった。これはプレイヤー・キルだと仮定するも、その殺害方法に全く見当がつかず……。奇怪な事件を、キリトとアスナが追う。

『キャリバー』——《ALO》伝説の聖剣《エクスカリバー》。その獲得クエストがついに始まった。守護するモンスターたちの強さから一度は獲得を諦めていたキリトだったが、これを機に再び争奪戦に本格参戦する。しかし、このクエストには壮大な裏イベントがあり……。

『はじまりの日』——《SAO》正式稼働初日。茅場晶彦によるデスゲーム開始の声明を受けた直後。キリトが決断した、このゲームを生き抜くための最初の一手。それは、ベータテスト時に攻略経験があるクエストを真っ先にクリアし、初期装備よりも強力な剣を獲得することだった——。



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かわはら れき
川原 礫

ソロクエストの一環として、バイクの免許を取るために教習所に通いました。この歳になって先生に怒られるのはとても新鮮な経験でした。ソロレベルは上がったけどちょっとヘコミました。あとクラッチって何ですか？

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アクセル・ワールド1～8

ソードアート・オンライン1アインクラッド

ソードアート・オンライン2アインクラッド

ソードアート・オンライン3フェアリー・ダンス

ソードアート・オンライン4フェアリー・ダンス

ソードアート・オンライン5ファントム・パレット

ソードアート・オンライン6ファントム・パレット

ソードアート・オンライン7マザーズ・ロザリオ

ソードアート・オンライン8アーリー・アンド・レイト

イラスト: abec

あべしっ！

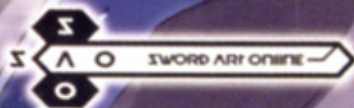


008

REKI KAWAHARA ABEC BEE-PEE

SWORD ART ONLINE

EARLY AND LATE





「.....WHAT IS THIS DISH? RAMEN?」

— ASUNA § SUB-LEADER OF THE GUILD KNOWN AS
«KNIGHTS OF BLOOD». A RAPIER
MASTER NICKNAMED THE «FLASH».

「THEN, I'LL GIVE YOU AN ANSWER OF EQUAL
VALUE TO THIS BOWL OF FAKE RAMEN.」

— HEATHCLIFF § GUILD LEADER OF THE STRONGEST GUILD
«KNIGHTS OF BLOOD».
POSSESSES THE UNIQUE SKILL «HOLY SWORD»,
AND IS KNOWN FOR HIS OVERWHELMING POWER.
DOES NOT GET ALONG VERY WELL WITH KIRITO.

「.....SO, GUILD LEADER,
DO YOU HAVE ANY CLUES?」

— KIRITO § A PLAYER TRYING TO SAVE EVERYONE IN THE
VRMMO DEATH GAME «SAO»,
NICKNAMED THE «BLACK SWORDSMAN».
HE IS A «SOLO PLAYER» WHO POSSESSES THE
UNIQUE SKILL, «DUAL BLADES».

LIZBETH

§ A GIRL WHO FORGED ONE OF KIRITO'S SWORDS IN <<SAO>>. IN <<ALO>>, SHE RUNS A WEAPONS SHOP AS A LEPRECHAUN.

「GREAT! ALL WEAPONS, FULLY REPAIRED!」

「THANKS FOR YOUR HARD WORK!!」

「EVERYONE, THANK YOU FOR COMING TODAY IN RESPONSE TO MY URGENT CALL! I'LL REPAY YOU FOR THIS ONE DAY-- IN SPIRIT! WELL THEN-- LET'S DO OUR BEST ON THE QUEST FOR THE <<HOLY SWORD EXCALIBUR>>!」

「YEAH--!」

LYFA

§ KIRITO'S "LITTLE SISTER" (COUSIN), HER REAL NAME IS SUGUHA. IN <<ALO>>, SHE LIVES AS A FREE-SPIRITED GLYPH MAGIC SWORDSWOMAN.

SINON

§ A GIRL WHOM KIRITO HELPED IN <<SAO>>. IN <<ALO>>, SHE PLAYS AS A CAIT SITH ARCHER.

SILICA

§ A GIRL WHOM KIRITO HELPED IN <<SAO>>. IN <<ALO>>, SHE APPEARS AS A BEAST TAMER CAIT SITH.

ASUNA

§ KIRITO'S GIRLFRIEND. IN <<ALO>>, SHE PLAYS AN UNDEINE SPELLCASTER.

KLEIN

§ KIRITO'S UNSEPERABLE BEST FRIEND. IN <<ALO>>, HE IS A SALAMANDER KATANA-USER.

YUI

§ A FEMALE-TYPE AI KIRITO ENCOUNTERED IN <<SAO>>. IN <<ALO>>, SHE MATERIALIZES AS A NAVIGATION PIXIE AND ASSISTS THE PARTY.



「----LET'S GO.
WHILE I DRAW THE <<ONE WITH THE SEED>>'S
ATTENTION, HURRY AND FINISH OFF THE
<<ONE WITH THE FLOWER>>。」

— COPER § A PLAYER KIRITO MET ON HIS FIRST QUEST
RIGHT AFTER THE START OF THE GAME.

「.....UNDERSTOOD!」

— KIRITO § A YOUNG BOY DRAGGED INTO THE DEATH
GAME <<SAO>>. ALSO A BETA TESTER.

Anti-Criminal Code Effective Area

Also known as «Area».

«Sword Art Online» divides the «Field» where monsters run rampant and the «Main Town» where players make preparations and rest. The insides of a main town is called «Area», where players are absolutely unable to wound other players. The slashing of a weapon would only invoke the system effects, the HP bar would not decrease at all, and all kinds of poisonous items also wouldn't function. In other words, it is as its name implies, a direct act of crime of all kinds cannot be performed within the Area.

However, there are still some loopholes. One of them is requesting a «Total HP deplete mode» duel to a sleeping opponent, and moving the opponent's finger to press the OK button, before cutting the opponent's head off. Another method is carrying the unconscious body of the opponent out of the Area, and then beginning to attack. In other words, unless special conditions were met, homicide is impossible within the Anti-Criminal Code Effective Area.



A Murder Case in the Area

Aincrad 57th floor, April 2024

Part 1

Just what's with her, this girl?

Well, sure, the one who said "The weather's so nice, so why don't you go take a nap" was indeed me, the one who laid down on the grass to demonstrate those words was also me, and of course the one who carelessly fell asleep was me yet again.

But to think that just by taking a short nap of slightly less than thirty minutes, I would open my eyes to find her soundly asleep right next to me. There should be a limit to how much someone can exceed my expectations. I don't know whether to think this as boldness, stubbornness, or maybe — it was simply a lack of sleep?

Just what is with this. Shaking my head left and right with that thought of utter helplessness expressed on my face, I stared at the beautifully dignified face of the rapier user Asuna «The Flash» — the sub-leader of the guild "Knights of the Blood", lightly breathing as she slept.

The story started when I, having lost my mood to go into the gloomy labyrinth area with how good the weather was, planned to spend the whole day counting butterflies at the small knolls surrounding the teleport gate in the main town.

The weather was truly splendid. The virtual floating city Aincrad's four seasons is synchronized with reality, but the degree of accuracy in the replication is really overly rigorous, with the summers hot without fail daily, and the winters cold as they are supposed to be. In addition to temperature, there are also rain and wind, moisture, dust level, and even swarms of insects included as parameters for the climate. Usually, if one of the parameters was good, you can expect another to be horrible.

But today was different. The temperature was mildly warm, genial rays of sunlight permeated through the air, the gentle breeze blew constantly, yet not overly so, and to top it all off, no weird insects appeared. Even if it was

spring, having this many parameters for the climate set at good values is an event that occurs no more than five times a year.

The digital god was probably rewarding me for the hardships I endured whilst clearing the front lines, and wanted me to lie down for a nice nap. Understanding this, I was about to follow his will but ——

When I laid down against the lush gentle hill and began to fall asleep, a pair of white leather shoes crunched down right beside my head. At the same time, a familiar voice strictly came from above. Saying thus:

——The clearing group is in the labyrinth zone doing their best, so why are you here leisurely taking a nap?

With my eyes virtually closed, I replied. Saying thus:

——'Tis weather is most fullsome from that of the year. We canst do naught but enjoy it to its end.

The strict voice then rebutted yet again:

——The weather hath changed naught from day to day.

To this, I answered thus:

——Rest hither by my side and thou shalt soon understand.

Of course, the exchange proceeded in modern tongue in reality, but anyway, as a result, she really laid down beside me for reasons unknown to me, and actually managed to fall into a deep slumber.

Now then.

It was currently before noon, some of the players going to and leaving from the teleport gate plaza were staring without restraint at Asuna and I neatly lying side by side on the lush field. Some of them stared wide-eyed in shock, some giggled and there were even a few impolite ones flooding the area with flashes coming from recording crystals.

Then again, they can't really be blamed. When speaking of the sub-leader of the KoB, Asuna, a conquest monster that could make crying kids quiet down, or a turbo engine that continues to push down the front line at a surging quick pace is what comes to mind. And as for this solo player, Kirito —— although not quite to my liking —— the top delinquent of the

clearing group, who always hung out with a bunch of frivolous guys, and played stupid games with them.

With that particular combination taking a nap together, even I, one of the people involved, felt like laughing. Even though I say that, I would be the one suffering if she were to get angry after I wake her up, so leaving her there was probably my only choice.

——The desire to do so was great, but I couldn't actually do it.

Because if «The Flash» had continued to sleep soundly like this, she may be targeted by all sorts of harassment —— and not to mention —— at worst, she may even be PKed.

It's true that where we are at now, the central plaza of the main street area of the 59th floor was still within the «area».

More accurately, it should be said to be the «Anti-Criminal Code Effective Area».

Inside this area, players are definitely unable to hurt other players. Even if they used weapons to hack at each other, there would only be a purple system effect, and the other player's HP bar wouldn't drop by even one millimeter, with the various poison-causing items having no effect as well. Of course, theft of items and such is also impossible.

In other words, the area was just like what the term "Anti-Criminal" meant; with no way to carry out criminal acts directly. This is an absolute rule in this death game called «SAO», on the same level with the rule that «Once the HP becomes zero, it means death».

But unfortunately, there were still some loopholes around this rule.

One of them is when the player's sleeping. There are times when players, with their energy exhausted through long durations of battle, are basically unconscious when they go into a deep sleep, and unable to wake up even with some stimulations. With that opportunity, one could raise a request to duel in «Complete Decisive Mode» and move the sleeping opponent's finger to press on the OK button. All that was left was to literally make the opponent sleep like the dead.

Another method, that's even more daring, was to drag the opponent's body out of the area. The player lying on the ground couldn't be forcefully moved

through the protection of the «Code», but they can be moved about freely if placed on the «Stretcher» item.

These two methods were actually used by people in the past. The «Red»s' evil passion can be said to be completely out of our imagination. Right now, all the players were taking such tragedies as a lesson, and would definitely sleep in player homes with doors that can be locked, or inns. Even for me, I'd use the «Searching Skill» before I sleep to set up an alarm nearby and wouldn't dare to sleep soundly before that.

——However.

At this moment, «The Flash», fast asleep beside me, was doubtlessly letting out delta waves recklessly. She probably wouldn't wake up even if I took out a make-up item to draw graffiti on that face of hers. Seriously now, I don't know whether she's really daring or stubborn or——

"Maybe...she's really tired."

I muttered.

In SAO, even though it depends on the build as well, solo play will be the most effective for those who are aiming to level up. However, this girl was not only spending time intently watching the leveling progress of the other members in her guild, but also leveling up at almost the same rate as me. I guessed she must have sacrificed lots of sleep to train on mobs even late at night.

I, too, have memories of the difficulty of doing that. The me from 4 to 5 months ago was similarly immersed in such hardcore experience gaining, and I would sleep for several hours, during which I felt like I was dead, completely unable to be woken up.

I swallowed a sigh, took out a drink from my storage to get ready for the long battle, and sat back down on the grass.

I was the one who told her to sleep. In that case, I should have the obligation to stay here until she woke up.

As the orange sun revealed its face from the outside of the floating city, Asuna «The Flash» finally woke up with a soft sneeze.

I believe that she'd been sleeping for well over 8 hours. It wasn't a simple problem of her taking a nap anymore. Having accompanied her without

getting to eat lunch, I looked forward to seeing this cold and cool sub-leader-sama's interesting reaction upon understanding the situation at the very least, as I stared at her fixedly.

"...Unyuu..."

Asuna muttered something strange, blinked a few times, and then looked up at me.

Her perfectly shaped eyebrows frowned slightly. She used her right hand to push herself off the grass shakily, and then shook that chestnut-colored hair of hers before looking right, left and right again.

Lastly, Asuna looked at me who was sitting beside her cross-legged once more——

Her transparent-like snowy-white skin immediately flushed red (most likely, out of embarrassment), and then turned somewhat blue (most likely, she's thinking hard), and finally, reddened out once again (most likely, out of extreme rage).

"Wha...yo...wh..."

I gave my biggest smile to «The Flash» who was again muttering strange things to herself yet again, and spoke.

"Good morning. Did you sleep well?"

Her hand, covered by the white leather glove, jolted.

However, as expected of the sub-leader of the strongest guild, Asuna seemed to have succeeded on the saving throw for restraining her rage as she neither drew her rapier nor immediately ran away.

She just gritted those elegantly glossy teeth of hers, from which a short phrase was forced out,

"...One meal."

"Ha?"

"A meal. I'll treat you one, no matter how expensive. We're even with that. How's that."

I don't hate this girl's straightforward personality. She, who has just woken up, immediately understood why I'd spent so much time accompanying her

until she awoke. Not just to prevent PKs, but even to the extent of allowing her to relieve the fatigue she'd built up, letting her sleep for as long as she wanted.

I curled my lips — without a trace of sarcasm this time — and smiled before answering with an okay.

I actually wanted to use this chance to joke and say that we should just go over to her house to eat her self-prepared food, but I still managed to control this impulse in the end. I raised my stretched-out legs and used the recoil to stand up, then offered my right hand as I said,

"The restaurant on the main streets of the 57th floor is rather good, despite being run by an NPC. Let's go there."

"...Fine."

Asuna coldly grabbed onto my hand and stood up before sharply looking away. She raised her hands up high as if she was about to breathe in all of the sunset air into her lungs.

1 year and 5 months have already passed since this death game called «Sword Art Online» began operating.

Before we knew it, almost 60% of the 100 floors of the floating city of Aincrad, which we first thought was extremely distant, were conquered, with the foremost front line at the 59th floor currently. The time taken to clear each floor on average was thus, 10 days. As for whether such a speed was fast or slow, even I, who was more knowledgeable about the clearing, couldn't tell. However, with this constant clearing speed, «A sentiment to enjoy life» seemed to develop in the upper-median floors, regardless of how meagre it was.

On the main street of the 57th level «Marten», such an atmosphere was rather abundant. This large street that's only 2 floors away from the front line had inevitably turned into the base camp for the clearing groups, as well as a tourist attraction. With the arrival of evening, the place would become extremely busy with the players returning from the front line above, or those coming from lower floors for dinner.

Asuna and I, who came down to Marten through the transfer gate on the 59th floor, walked side by side on this main street crowded with people. The many people we passed by who widened their eyes, startled, gave a feeling not at all pleasant. It's no wonder that they would have such an

expression, since this aloof, beautiful woman, reputed to even have a fan club, had a very suspicious looking solo player walking brazenly by her side. I guess Asuna really wanted to use all of her agility to rush into the aforementioned shop, but unfortunately for her — or perhaps fortunately, only I knew where the shop was.

As I pondered upon how there wouldn't be such a chance again even until the last day of SAO as we walked on for about 5 minutes, on the right side of the street, I could see a somewhat large restaurant.

"Over here?"

Asuna looked at the shop with a relieved, as well as suspicious expression, and I nodded to her.

"That's right. I recommend the fish here over the meat."

I pushed open the swing door and held it, and the rapier user just looked nonchalant as she walked in.

The voice of the NPC waitress welcomed us in, and as we started to move around in this somewhat crowded shop, I could still feel several stares being shot at us. The mental fatigue on me was starting to weigh a lot more than the happiness in my heart. It's not easy being stared at like this every day.

However, Asuna was unaffected as she passed through the center of the shop, and immediately headed for the table deep inside, beside the window. I awkwardly pulled out the chair, upon which she sat down in a fluid manner.

Somehow, it appears that the one being treated was forced into the role of an escort, but I still sat down in front of her. There's still the fact that I could feast without holding back, so I ordered the appetizer with a wine, the main course and even the dessert, all in plentiful amounts, before heaving a sigh.

Asuna immediately drank up the beverage in the flute glass that just arrived, then just like me, let out a long sigh.

She used her light brown eyes that had let their guard down somewhat to look at me, and murmured to me with a barely audible voice,

"We...anyway, for today...thanks."

"Heh!?"

Asuna stared at me, who's looking shocked, and said again,

"It's a word of thanks. For guarding me."

"Ahh...no, well, erm, y- you're welcome."

Normally, in our clearing group meetings, I would often debate with her intensely over the weaknesses of the boss and the positioning of the vanguards and the rearguards, so after hearing such an unexpected thanks, I was really flabbergasted. Asuna then chuckled and leaned back against the chair. She then stared off into the sky with a expression much more gentle than before, and whispered,

"It felt like...that was the first time...I slept so soundly since I came here..."

"Is...Isn't that an exaggeration?"

"Not at all, it's true. Normally, I'll sleep for 3 hours at most before waking up."

I wet my mouth with the sour-sweet fluid in the cup and asked,

"That's not because the alarm clock woke you up?"

"Yeah. It's not as serious as insomnia...but I would get a nightmare and end up waking up."

"...I see."

My heart suddenly felt a sharp pain. Someone had once said the same thing to me before, and that person's face flashed through my mind.

I then finally noticed the ever-ordinary fact that «The Flash» was a living player too, and pondered on how to answer.

"Er...well...how do I say this. If you ever want to take a nap outside, just tell me."

The words sounded stupid even to me, but Asuna smiled again and nodded,

"That's true. If there's a day with such great weather settings again, I'll leave it to you."

On seeing her smile, I noticed that this woman in front of me was a beauty of a near unbelievable scale once again, and was immediately at a loss for words.

Luckily, the NPC who brought the plate of salad over killed the current awkward atmosphere. I immediately took up the mysterious spice atop the table and sprinkled it on the mysterious vegetables of various colours, and then used the fork to stuff them into my mouth.

After wolfing down for a while, I randomly grumbled to avoid the earlier tension,

"Thinking about it, even though it's not beneficial to us nutritionally, why are we eating vegetables?"

"Eh— but it tastes good."

Asuna elegantly chewed on what looked like lettuce, and argued back.

"It's not disgusting per say...but if only there's mayonnaise or something."

"Ahh—that's right. I agree."

"And salad sauce...tomato sauce... and..."

""SOY SAUCE!!""

Both of us shouted out at the same time and started laughing together——

But at the next moment,

A scream of what is unmistakably, horror, could be heard in the distance.

"...KYAAAAAHHHHH!!"

———!?

I took in a breath and raised my waist as my hand reached for the sword on my back.

Asuna, who also put her right hand on the hilt of the rapier, whispered in a sharp tone,

"Outside the shop!"

She shouted and immediately kicked the chair away before running to the entrance. I also hurriedly chased behind that white knight outfit.

As we ran out to the road, another ear-piercing scream like that of silk being ripped could be heard.

The voice most likely came from the plaza a building block away. Asuna glanced at me first, and then sprinted south with all she had.

I continued to chase this profile that was like pure white lighting. As the spikes of the boots ground on the pavement scattered sparks about, I turned east and finally rushed into the round plaza in front of me.

There, an unbelievable scene laid before me.

On the north side of the plaza, there was a towering stone building that looked like a church.

A rope was dangling down from the display window in the middle of the second floor, and at the front end of a loop — a man was dangling there.

That was not an NPC. Perhaps that guy had just came back from hunting since he had full plate armor with a large helmet on him. The rope was sinking into the armor on the neck, but the players gathered at the plaza weren't screaming in fear for this reason. In this world, there's no such thing as dying from suffocation with the use of a rope-type item.

The source of fear for everyone was what stabbed deeply into the man's chest, a black short spear.

The guy had both hands grabbed onto the grip of the spear as his mouth opened and closed. During this time, the wound on his chest continued to give out a red flash effect like that spilling blood and as it kept flickering.

In other words, at this moment, the man's HP was decreasing bit by bit. It was the «Pierce DoT» trait that only a few of the piercing weapons had.

It looked like the black short spear was a weapon that focused on continuous damage. I caught sight of a countless number of spikes sprouting out from halfway down its shaft.

I recovered from my momentary shock and shouted out,

"PULL IT OUT!!"

The man glanced at me. He then moved his hands sluggishly and got ready to pull the spear out, but a weapon that's embedded deeply inside a

body couldn't be moved that easily. Of course, there's the possibility that he's unable to exert his strength because of the fear of death.

The man who's being hanged on the wall was at least 10m away from the ground. Even with my agility, there was no way I could reach him if I jumped up.

Then, could I use a throwing pick or something to cut the rope? But if I missed the rope and hit the man, and if his HP ended up dropping to zero...

Normally speaking, this place was still «Within the area», so there's absolutely no chance of that happening. But speaking of which, if that were the case, that spear wouldn't cause any damage.

As I was stuck in my indecision, Asuna's sharp shout entered my ears.

"CATCH HIM FROM BELOW!"

And then, she rushed towards the entrance of the church at a lightning quick speed. It seemed that she was trying to use the stairs inside to climb up to the second level and slice the rope.

"Got it!"

I shouted a reply from behind Asuna, and hurriedly ran down to the spot below where the man in the air was dangling.

—However.

As I ran halfway through, the eyes peeking from the bottom of the large helmet worn by the man suddenly widened and stared at a certain spot in the air. I immediately sensed that he was looking at something.

It was his own HP bar. Or more accurately, the moment it turned to zero.

Mingled into the shouts and screams of the crowd in the plaza, the man seemed to have yelled out something.

And then — a flash of light dyed the night sky blue together alongside the sound of countless glass breaking. I could only look up blankly at the polygon fragments that scattered.

The rope that lost the object it was holding slammed against the wall. A second later, the black short spear that fell — or the weapon — let out a heavy metallic sound as it stabbed into the stone floor on the ground.

The screams let out by countless players overwhelmed even the peaceful sounding BGM that filled the town.

I was thoroughly shocked, but I still tried to widen my eyes and tore through the wide space around the church with my vision. It should be around —— what I was searching for was something that would definitely appear.

In other words, «The declaration message of the winner in a duel».

This was the main street, which meant that it's right smack inside the effective range of the Anti-Criminal Code. If the player HP was damaged and even resulted in death here, there's only one possibility.

The person had agreed to a decisive mode duel and lost.

There was no other way. Definitely.

In that case, with the death of the man, there should have been a huge system window like «Winner/name, match time minutes/seconds» appearing nearby. If I see the window, I could immediately tell who the person who used the short spear to kill the man in full-plate armor was.

——However.

"...Where is it..."

I couldn't help but mutter.

The system window didn't appear. There was no sign of it at all around the plaza. Despite how it would appear for only 30 seconds.

"Everyone! Please help find the system window that shows who won!!"

I shouted out loud enough to overwhelm the surrounding commotion. It appears that the other players immediately understood my intention as they started to look around for the window.

However, no one shouted out saying that they found the target. It's been past 15 seconds.

Did it mean that it was inside the building? Did the window appear in the room on the second level of the church where the rope dangled out from? If that's the case, Asuna should be able to see it.

The moment I thought of that, I spotted the white knight uniform of «The Flash» at the aforementioned window.

"Asuna!! Is the winner shown there!?"

Normally, I wouldn't call her name out directly out of fear, but I had immediately asked her without adding a '-san' just for the sake of gaining time. However, the face that was as pale as the clothing quickly shook left and right.

"None! There's no system window, or even anyone else inside!"

"...Why..."

Moaning so, I looked around as futilely as before. A few seconds later, I heard a slight whisper.

"...It's impossible now. It's been more than 30 seconds..."

I passed by the nun NPC who was always stationed at the first level of the church and immediately climbed up the stairs deep inside the building.

The second level was separated into 4 small rooms that were just like the private rooms in inns, but unlike inns, they couldn't be locked. I passed by three rooms, and couldn't find any players hiding in them, whether it's by the «Player Search» skill or by sight. I bit my lips and walked into the 4th small room where the incident happened.

Asuna, who turned her head to look at me from beside the window, was still looking strong, but I could tell that her heart was really shaken. In fact, even I couldn't hide my tense eyebrows.

"There's no one else inside the church."

I reported, and the sub-leader of the KoB immediately asked back.

"Is it possible for the person to have some cloak with hiding capabilities?"

"Even at the frontlines, I haven't found anything that can negate the effects of my player search ability. For added precaution, I've requested other players to block the church entrance. Even if the person's invisible, he should come into contact with the other players and be automatically revealed. There's no back door here, and this is the only room with a window.

"Yeah...I understand. Look at this."

Asuna nodded her head, and then pointed at a section of the room with her finger that was covered in the white glove.

There was a simple wooden table placed over there. This furniture that couldn't be moved was a so-called «Position-locked object».

On one of the table's legs, there was a somewhat thin-looking yet sturdy rope tied there. It was tied, but in fact, that was not actually done by hand. Someone just needed to call out the rope popup window, click on the tie button and then chose what to tie for it to fix itself onto the target automatically. Once tied, the rope would definitely not break or loosen unless the weight on the rope was beyond its durability or it was cut by a blade.

The black glossy rope took up about 2 meters length inside the room before extending outside through the window to the south. One couldn't see it from here, but the tip was tied in a loop, and the full-plate armor man was dangling from the loop.

"Hmm..."

As I let out that low sound, I tilted my head,

"Just what's going on?"

"If this is a normal situation..."

Asuna answered me while tilting her head as well.

"...The duelling opponent of that player tied this rope, stabbed the short spear into his chest, and then stuffed the victim's neck into the loop before thrusting him through the window...something like that..."

"Was he deliberately showing it to everyone...? No, before that..."

I forcefully took a deep breath, and then declared with a clear voice,

"There was no window of victory declaration anywhere. Not a single one of those people standing at the plaza found it, you know. If it was a duel, there should be a window appearing nearby."

"But...that's impossible."

She gave a sharp rebuttal.

"In the «area», the player's HP bar can only be damaged through an accepted duel. You should know that as well!"

"...Yeah, that's truly the case."

Both of us stared at each other and remained silent.

It's like what Asuna said; what happened just now couldn't possibly happen. And all we knew, was that one player died while everyone was watching, without the slight idea on who did it, why it happened, or how it did.

The voices of commotion that continued to come from the plaza outside the window could be heard. It seemed that they were noticing the anomaly in this «incident» too.

Soon after, Asuna looked straight at me and said,

"We can't leave this alone. If someone really found out about something like a «PK skill inside the area», we'll have to hurry up and find it, and announce a way to counter it, or else it will definitely develop into something huge."

"...It's rare for me to have such a moment with you, but I wholeheartedly agree with you."

After seeing me nod my head, «The Flash» gave a barely noticeable wry smile and quickly reached her hand out to me.

"Then, be sure to cooperate with me until this case is solved. I'll say this first. There's no time for naps."

"Aren't you the one who's been sleeping..."

I grumbled softly and offered my hand.

And then, the hastily assembled detective and assistant — though the role assignments aren't clear — joined together their hands gloved in white and black tightly.

Part 2

After retrieving the rope «evidence», Asuna and I left the room and returned to the entrance of the church. As for the other piece of evidence, the black short spear, I had already put it into my item storage before we moved.

I had requested two players I knew to watch the entrance. I thanked them and raised my doubts, but no one actually moved through here. I returned to the plaza and raised my hand to the crowd watching the commotion before shouting out loud,

"SORRY. TO THE EYEWITNESS WHO FIRST SPOTTED THIS, IF YOU'RE STILL AROUND, CAN WE TALK TO YOU?"

After a few seconds, a girl timidly walked out from the crowd. I'd never met this person before. She was equipped with an ordinary one-handed sword made by an NPC. It seemed that she was someone who came here to sightsee from the middle levels.

What was vexing was that this girl actually showed a frightened expression after seeing me. Asuna then substituted me and walked in front of me before saying to her in a gentle tone,

"Sorry for bothering you after you saw such a horrifying thing. Your name is?"

"I...I'm called «Yolko»."

I really have a slight impression on this slightly trembling voice, and couldn't help but ask.

"Were you the one...who gave the first scream?"

"Ye...Yes..."

The female player called Yolko nodded; shaking her slightly curly deep-blue hair in the process. From the appearance of her avatar, she was probably about 17-18 years old.

The simple large eyes that were of the same color as her hair suddenly let out tears.

"I...I...I'm a friend of the person who was just killed. We agreed to come here to have a meal today, but we got lost here...and...and then..."

It seemed that she couldn't continue on as she could only use her hand to cover her mouth.

Asuna gently patted her slightly trembling shoulders and brought her into the church, there were many benches that were lined together, and Asuna let her sit down on one of them before sitting beside her.

As for me, I stood slightly further off as I waited for the girl to calm down. If she saw exactly how her friend was killed viciously, that would be a huge trauma the likes of which we couldn't even imagine.

Asuna gently stroked Yolko's back for a while, and Yolko finally stopped crying before apologizing in a faint whispering tone.

"It's alright. We can wait. Can you talk to us slowly once you've calmed down?"

"Yes...I-I'm a lot better now."

Unexpectedly, Yolko's rather strong as she straightened her back while Asuna patted it, and nodded.

"That guy is...called «Kains». We used to be in the same guild...and would now occasionally team up together or have meals together...and today, we originally came here to eat..."

She forcefully closed her eyes, and then continued on in a trembling voice.

"...But there were too many people here, so we got lost at the plaza...as I was looking around, suddenly, someone — «Kains» dropped out from the window of this church and was dangling in the air...and there was a short spear stabbed into his chest..."

"Did you see anyone else around?"

After hearing Asuna's question, Yolko immediately quietened down.

She then slowly and clearly nodded.

"Yes...it was just for a moment, but I felt like I saw...someone standing behind «Kains»..."

I clenched my fists subconsciously.

Was the criminal in that room? If that's the case, the criminal pushed the victim —— «Kains» out of the window and got away while everyone's looking.

In that case, the criminal must have used some sort of equipment with a stealth ability equipment, but such an item effect would naturally weaken when moving. Speaking of which, does the criminal have some high level hidden skill to make up for this flaw?

At this moment, my mind thought of the dangerous-sounding term «Assassin».



Don't tell me there's really a weapon system that even Asuna and I don't know of? If such a skill can negate the Anti-Criminal code...?

Asuna may have thought the same thing as me as her back shuddered. However, she immediately raised her head up and asked Yolko,

"Was that profile someone you know?"

"..."

Yolko closed her lips and pondered for a while, and after a few seconds, shook her head to indicate that she didn't. After seeing her indicate so, it was my turn to ask with my calmest possible voice,

"Well...it may not be the best time to ask this, but do you have any clues...? Like any reason why Kains-san was killed..."

Just like what I was worried about, Yolko immediately stiffened the moment she heard that. It couldn't be helped, since I was asking a girl who just witnessed her friend being killed whether there was any reason for revenge. This question may be rude, but it couldn't be ignored. If she knew of anyone that hated Kains, that would become a powerful clue.

But this time, Yolko shook her head again.

I was somewhat disappointed, but I simply said "I see, sorry."

Of course, it may be that Yolko didn't know. However, the criminal that killed «Kains» could either be a real killer or a «Player Killer» in this MMORPG. In this PK, they're basically players who existed to kill other players. The red players who were massacring through Aincrad in the darkness were these kind of players.

In other words, one person, out of the hundreds of players who are said to be criminals, killers or have the tendency to be such, may have killed «Kains» inside the area through such a mysterious means. To be honest, I really don't know how to find the killer from so many people.

Asuna seemed to have reached the same conclusion as she weakly sighed.

As Yolko indicated that she didn't dare to walk downstairs alone, Asuna and I sent her to the nearest inn before returning to the transfer gate plaza.

30 minutes had passed since this incident happened, and the surrounding people were starting to decrease in number. However, there were still about 20 players at the scene. Most of them were clearing members, waiting for the report from both Asuna and me.

Asuna and I first explained to them that the name of the murder victim was called «Kains», and the way he was killed was unknown. I then told them that there's likely an «Inside area PK» skill that might exist.

"...That's how things are. Everyone is to be careful when walking on the streets. If possible, please warn other players, too."

I concluded, and the rest nodded with a stern expression.

"Got it. I'll ask those selling information to publish this on the newspapers..."

A player representative of a large guild answered, and everyone scattered. I glanced over at the clock in the corner of my eye and found that it's just past 7pm, which caused me to be somewhat shocked.

"Then...what do we do next?"

I asked Asuna beside me, and she immediately answered,

"Let's check the evidence we have first, especially the rope and short spear. If we know its origin, we might be able to find the criminal."

"I see...since we can't find the motive, let's start from the evidence, shall we? In that case, we have to use the Inspection skill. You probably...never added this skill, right?"

"I guess you didn't, either...speaking of which..."

At this moment, Asuna's expression started to change. She stared at me and said,

"Can you please stop referring to me with «you, you, you»!?"

"Eh? Ah, I see...then...should I use «-san»? «sub-leader»? Or «The Flash-sama»...?"

The last one is how her fanclub always called her. What she thought of that was clearly seen when Asuna's facial expression became tense and she burned me through with a laser stare. She then looked aside and said,

"Just call me «Asuna». Didn't you call me that before?"

"Un-Understood."

I, who felt scared, obediently nodded and hurriedly dragged the topic back.

"As for the Inspection skill...do you have any friends you know of with it...?"

"Hmm~"

She pondered for a while, and quickly shook her head.

"I have a friend who runs a weapons store, but it's the busiest time at this point, and I really can't ask her to help me out immediately...."

It's true that this is the time players who finished their adventures would run into a weapons store to repair or buy weapons.

"In that case, I'll have to ask the boss of a merchandise shop. That large-axe warrior's proficiency is a little unnerving for me though..."

"Are you talking about...that very tall man? I think he's called...Agil or something, right?"

Asuna asked me as I immediately called out the message window and started typing.

"But the merchandise store should be rather busy now, right?"

"Who cares?"

I answered and immediately pressed the send button.

Asuna and I walked out from the transfer gate, and immediately reached the main street of the 50th floor «Algade», where the buzz and chaos remained as usual.

The transfer gate was still in effect, but along the shopping street on the main roads, there were numerous player shops lined up together. As for the reason why, it's because the rent here is unbelievably cheap compared to the streets on the floors below.

Of course, the area for these cheaply rented shops is very narrow, and the appearance is dirty. However, some players like such an Asian-styled —— or the messiness of a certain electronics district. I'm one of them as well,

and I recently thought of buying a player's home here and using this street as my base.

Amidst the exotic BGM and the cries of selling, I smelled junk food coming from the stalls and lead Asuna forward quickly. The rapier user revealed a pair of nice legs from under the mini-skirt of her white knight uniform, and her looking like this when walking was really too eye-catching.

"Oi, let's move faster...OIII!!!"

I realized that the sound of high-heels on the left-rear side was moving further and further away, so I widened my eyes and shouted.

"HOW CAN YOU JUST BUY THINGS SO RANDOMLY!!!"

«The Flash»-sama, who bought a suspicious looking kebab from a suspicious looking hawker, took a bite of it and answered nonchalantly,

"We just ran out after eating only salad. Yup...this tastes good."

She continued to chew and said to me "Take this" as she handed the other kebab in her left hand to me.

"Eh? For me?"

"Didn't I say that I wanted to treat you?"

"Ah...ahh..."

I instinctively lowered my head in thanks and received the kebab, and then realized that the treat the other party was supposed to give went from a grand meal to a kebab. On a side note, as we ran out of the restaurant, the expenses of the meal were deducted from our item window based off the average.

I chewed on the ethnic tasting kebab that had a unique foreign flavour, thinking that I must eat this girl's cooking one day, as I headed forward.

Once the two sticks of kebab were finished, we arrived at our destination. I let go of my hand to let the wooden stick disappear, and then wiped my hand that wasn't dirtied on the leather coat before talking to the shop owner whose back faced us,

"Hello~ we're here~"

"...I won't entertain guys who aren't customers."

The boss of the grocery store and the axe warrior Agil grumbled with an awkward voice that didn't fit his rough appearance, and then, said to the customers in his shop,

"Sorry, we'll be closing shop for today."

""Ehh!?""" On hearing the grumbling, the burly shopkeeper cringed back and apologized as he chased all the customers away. He then called out his shop management menu to close the shop.

The extremely messy racks automatically closed, and the metal doors outside let out a creaking sound before closing up. At this moment, Agil finally turned over to look at me and said,

"I say, Kirito. In the field of business, the most important thing businessmen look for is trust, and the second most important thing is still trust. I'll skip the third and fourth, and for the fifth, if there's a chance, I'll make a killing..."

These strange notes vanished as he noticed the player standing beside me. Agil's beard at the bottom of his bald head shook as he just stood there. Asuna herself was smiling purely as she nodded at him.

"Long time no see, Agil-san. I'm sorry for bothering you at such short notice, but it's urgent, and we really need your help..."

Agil's stern expression immediately eased up, and he patted his chest saying to leave it to him, and even served us tea.

Men, who are unable to resist their congenital parameters, are really pitiful.

Agil finished listening to what we said to him in a room on the second level, and seemed to understand the seriousness of this situation too as the eyes under his promiscuous eyebrows narrowed.

"Did you say that his HP dropped to zero inside the «area»? ——Are you sure it wasn't a duel?"

The giant said with a thick and slightly deep voice, and I, who's leaning my body on the back of the chair, slowly nodded.

"In that situation, it was impossible for us not to see the victory declaration screen, so we should be thinking about it in such an aspect. Also...even if it was a duel, the victim was going to have a meal, so it would be impossible

for him to accept such a request. Besides, it was in a «Decisive duel mode», too."

"He was walking with that girl...Yolko-san before he died, so it's definitely not a «Sleep PK»."

Asuna shook the mug-type glass on the small round table and added on.

"Besides, it's really too complicated to have a sudden duel like this. I think we can consider it to be a planned PK. And...with this..."

I opened my window and materialized the rope evidence from my item storage and handed it over to Agil.

Of course, the end that was tied at the leg of the table was undone, but the other side was bound into a large loop.

Agil put that loop right in front of me, gave a disgusted look and snorted coldly before touching it with his large fingers.

He chose the «Inspection Skill» that pops out in the window. Asuna and I don't have such a skill, and even if we chose it, we would only get a failure ignore. However, as a merchant, Agil should be able to get some level of information.

In the end, the giant used a deep voice to state what only he was able to see on the screen.

"...Unfortunately, this isn't created by a player; it's just a common item that can be bought in an NPC shop. It's not of a high rank, either. The durability has already dropped by about half."

I remember that horrifying scene, and nodded.

"I guess so. Besides, it was dangling a player in full-plate armor. The weight had to be quite a lot."

But to a killer, several seconds was enough to drop the guy's HP down to zero.

"Never mind. I'm not really expecting anything much from the rope anyway. The important thing is this."

I touched my still open item window and materialized the next item.

The shiny black short spear immediately created a heavy sense of presence in this small room. In terms of weapon class, this short spear couldn't be compared to Asuna and my main weapon, but right now, that wasn't the point. This spear was used by someone to cruelly end another player's life, and it could be said to be a real «murder weapon».

I cautiously placed the short spear in Agil's hands to prevent it from touching anything else.

The entire spear was made from black-colored gold, and this kind of weapon was really rare. Its length was probably about 1m, and the base had a grip about 30cm long. At the tip of the handle, there was a 15cm long blade.

The special characteristic of this weapon was that the spear itself seemed to be covered with short spikes. Once the spear was stabbed deeply into the enemy, it would create the unique effect of becoming non-removable because of the spikes. A high strength value would be required to pull it out.

In this world, the strength power is represented by the value parameter set by the player and also the signal strength released from the brain to the Nerve Gear. At that moment, the full-plated guy stricken by fear —— Kains, was unable to produce clear signals to move his virtual body, which was why the spear didn't move even when he used his hands to grab onto it.

The moment I thought about this, I just felt even more convinced that this wasn't just a sudden PK. It may be a «premeditated murder». This was because the death caused by the «Continuous Pierce damage DOT» was too cruel. The victim wasn't killed by the enemy's own sword skill or weapon —— but by his own cowardice.

This thought instantly flashed through my mind, and suddenly got interrupted by Agil, who finished his inspection.

"This is made by a PC."

Asuna and I immediately pushed our bodies forward and inadvertently cried out, ""Really?""

A PC created item would mean that this weapon was created by a player with the «Smelting Skill». There would definitely be a record of that player's «name». Also, this short spear is likely to be a one and only item. Once we

directly ask the player, there's a high chance that we can know who ordered it.

"Who's the creator?"

On hearing Asuna's pressing voice, Agil lowered his head as he looked at the window and answered,

"«Grimlock»...that's how it's romanized. I have never heard of such a person, so at least he isn't a top-rated swordsmith. Maybe he's a guy who improved his smelting skills only to forge his own weapons..."

If even the merchant Agil didn't know who this swordsmith is, it was obvious that Asuna and I wouldn't; and the room entered a short silence again.

"However, we should be able to find that person. If he managed to upgrade his rank to such an extent to create this weapon, he can't possibly be a solo player all the time. If you go and listen to gossip in the middle floors, you'll definitely find someone who teamed up with «Grimlock» before."

"That's true. There can't possibly be many people like this idiot."

Agil nodded, and together with Asuna, looked at this stupid solo player.

"Wha...What? I-I'll occasionally party with other players, too."

"Only during boss battles."

After being told off coldly like this, I could only remain silent since I couldn't argue back.

Asuna snorted, and then turned to look at the short spear in Agil's hand.

"But...to be honest, even if we find «Grimlock», he probably won't say too much to us..."

I agree with that.

The one who killed Kains is actually an unknown red player who bought this short spear and not the swordsmith «Grimlock» himself. Using one's own weapon, recorded with their own «name», to kill someone will basically be like writing a name on a chopper in the real world and using it to kill. But speaking of which, the crafter-class players who have some sort of knowledge and experience should be able to determine the customer's intent when designing this weapon.

The «Continuous Pierce Damage DOT» has a rather weak effect on monsters. Mobs, which act according to the system, don't show any signs of fear as well. Even if they're hit and stunned by the piercing weapon, they'll immediately pull that thing out. Of course, the monster wouldn't possibly return it nicely to the player, instead it throws it far away, so it's impossible to get back that weapon until the battle ends.

Thus, the spear that was created was obviously meant to be used to deal with other players. Of all the swordsmiths I know of, all of them would refuse once they know the design.

But Grimlock still created this spear.

He may not be the killer — we can know his name through validation — but he may be a weak-willed person, or even a player who's secretly part of a red guild.

"...At least he won't reveal the information to us easily. If he wants payment for providing information..."

I just whispered, and Agil shook his head vehemently while Asuna glared at me.

"We'll pay half each then."

"...I understand. I'm on a pirate ship now anyway."

After shrugging my shoulders, I raise my last question to the stingy merchant.

"It's not much of a clue, but just tell me the name of this weapon."

The bald giant lowered his head for the third time to look at the window, and said,

"Yes...it's called «Guilty Thorn». Which means thorns of sin, right?"

"I see..."

I looked at that spiked short spear again. Of course, the weapon's name is randomly set by the system, so this name itself shouldn't possibly have any «human will» behind it.

—However.

"Guilty...Thorn..."

Asuna's murmuring suddenly caused a chill in me.

Part 3

Asuna, Agil, and me, the three of us headed from the transfer gate in «Algade» to the lowest floor of Aincrad, the «Starting City».

Our aim was to check the «Monument of Life» that stood within the Black Iron Palace. We have to at least check whether the swordsmith Grimlock was still alive before we looked for him.

It was spring, but the large «Starting City» was still basked in an atmosphere of desolation.

Of course, this wasn't the result of the randomly generated weather. The wide streets that were covered in darkness have no signs of players around, and even the BGMs performed by the NPC band are all ominous melodies.

Recently, I heard that there's a certain unbelievable rule — the largest guild of the lowest levels, the self-governing organization «Aincrad Liberation Force» banned players from going out at night. It looks like this might really have happened. There were patrol troops wearing similar dark grey armor as we walked down.

And once those guys saw us, they immediately came running over to us like youth police forces catching middle schoolers skipping class. They all backed away when they saw Asuna's absolute-zero stare-attack, but such action was really tense.

"...No wonder Algade's so bustling...the things here are so expensive..."

After hearing me mutter this out inadvertently, Agil told me a rumor that was even more horrifying.

"I hear that the army recently intends to start «taxing» the players."

"Eh!? Tax? No way...how do they intend to do so?"

"I don't know about that...maybe they'll automatically deduct from monster loots?"

Agil and I just stupidly joked around like this, but once we stepped on the stone floor of the Black Iron Palace, we immediately shut up.

As its name stated, this place was a large building assembled with black glossy pillars and metal boards. The air inside was obviously colder than

outside. Even Asuna, who moved forward quickly, seemed to be so cold that she's rubbing her exposed arms.

Maybe the reason no one is inside is because it's so late at night.

During the day, many people won't believe in the deaths of their friends or lovers and come here to check. Once they see a line mercilessly drawn on the name they're looking for, they'll normally start crying out loud. I guess Yolko, who witnessed the death of her friend Kains will still come here tomorrow to check. In fact, even I did the same thing not too long ago, and right now, I haven't managed to completely step out from that painful memory at all.

Just like that, we walked into the empty lobby, lit by blue flames.

Asuna and I arrived at the «Momentum of Life» that extended 10m sideways, and we stared at the portion that started with the letter «G» in alphabetical order.

Agil continued to walk to the right. Asuna and I held our breaths as we looked at the names mentioned, and seemed to find that name at the same time.

«Grimlock». On it — there's no line.

"...Still alive."

"Yeah."

Both of us heaved a sigh of relief at the same time. Slightly further away from us, Agil was looking at the «K» column, and immediately said to us with a serious look,

"Kains' definitely dead. The date of death is the month of Sakura, 22th, 18:27."

"...The date and time are correct. That's the time we left the restaurant."

Asuna muttered and looked down, lowering those long eyebrows of hers. Agil and I said a silent prayer. The Romanization of «Kains» should be read just as it was written. We checked with Yolko before.

After finishing all we had to do, we left Black Iron Palace and exhaled all the air held within us. Unknowingly, the BGM on the streets became a slow waltz used late at night. The NPC shops have all closed down, and the few

street lights were the only things lighting the streets. The patrol troops of the «Army» had disappeared.

We silently returned to the plaza where the transfer gate was, and at this moment, Asuna suddenly turned to look at me.

"...We'll start looking for Grimlock tomorrow."

"You're right..."

I nodded my head in agreement. Agil's thick eyebrows frowned.

"Well...my main occupation is a merchant, not a warrior..."

"I know. That's all for you now, you merchant."

I slapped him on the shoulder and pat him. Agil gave a relaxed expression, but sheepishly whispered a sorry in apology.

This good old bruiser isn't really thinking that «business is priority» or «it's really troublesome to investigate». He just doesn't want to meet that player who created such a short spear that killed someone. Of course, he's not scared; quite the opposite actually — he's worried that the rage he normally vented on monsters would suddenly explode.

Agil left us with a 'Do your best, you two', and vanished into the transfer gate. Asuna was ready to head back to headquarters for a while, so we disbanded for today.

"Let's meet at the transfer gate at the 57th floor at 9am tomorrow. You must reach there on time, and don't oversleep."

On hearing Asuna say this in the tone of a teacher or an older sister — even though I don't have one in the real world — I could only smile wryly and nod.

"I got it. You should be the one sleeping properly. If you're worried, I can be on standby beside——"

"NO NEED!"

After leaving these words behind, the sub-leader of the KoB quickly turned around and leapt into the transfer gate, leaving a red and white afterimage behind.

I, who was left behind, could only stand in front of the gate that was giving off blue and white lights for the time being and sort out what happened throughout the entire day. At first, it was just a simple «Today's weather is good», and yet I ended up being «The Flash» Asuna's nap guard; and just when both of us finally managed to go for dinner, we ended up involved in a murder case inside the «area», and now I became either a detective or an assistant taking on the murder mystery.

Of course, every single day in the floating city Aincrad «isn't normal», but it's been 1 and a half years since the death game started on November 6th 2022, and most of the players, including me — were at least living in the middle levels. Most of us will deliberately forget about our lives in the real world and focus on surviving in this «Daily Life» that's composed of swords, fighting, gold coins and dungeons.

But the incident today caused me to end up in another kind of abnormality. I don't know whether this will become some permanent thing that is to come...

As I thought about it, I took a few steps forward, entered the blue transfer gate and used a verbal command to send me to my current accommodation — the main street area on the 48th floor, «Lindas»; a floating sensation surrounded me with a strong glow.

As my feet landed on the ground once more, I stepped forward onto the stone floor of a different color, and the surrounding scenery immediately changed. It's been less than a week since I used the city of Lindas as a base, but I like how the canals threaded through all the streets with water wheels scattered about, spinning lazily. However, it's past 10pm now, and the streets were covered by the night scenery. Either way, the sound of blacksmiths at work no matter where I was during the day had completely disappeared.

I left the transfer gate, pondering on whether I should obediently follow through on the promise I made to the sub-leader-dono and go straight to sleep or get a drink in a bar run by an NPC. At that moment——

6-7 players suddenly surrounded me.

I immediately got ready to draw the sword on my back. Even if I was surrounded by dozens of people, I wouldn't be in danger as long as I was in the «area» — but such common sense became a little unreliable after the events of these past few hours.

I only moved my right fingers and controlled my urge to draw my sword.

I'd met all the people in this group. They were members of the largest clearing group «Divine Dragons Alliance». I spoke to one of them, who could be said to be one of the executives, standing amongst the people lined up in a semicircle.

"Good evening, Schmitt-san."

I took the initiative to smile and greet him, and this burly long spear user seemed to be at a loss for words, but he immediately frowned hard and said,

"...Kirito-san, I've something to ask you, so I came all the way here to wait for you to come back."

"Heh, I don't think you'll be asking about my birthday or blood type..."

I instinctively joked, and the thick eyebrows under his sports club ace-like short hair twitched.

We're on the clearing group, and we don't really have an antagonistic relationship, but I just can't get along with the people of the «Divine Dragons Alliance». In comparison, my relationship with the «Knights of the Blood» under Asuna's lead may be a little better.

The reason why we can't get along is due to the fact that while the «Knights of the Blood» aim to «clear the game with the fastest possible speed», the «Divine Dragons Alliance» members aim to get «the honor of the strongest guild». They basically wouldn't team up with other guilds and wouldn't openly reveal information about training fields. Also, they have a very thick-skinned insistence about dealing the last attack to the boss — due to the loot and the bonus experience.

On the other hand, if I think about it in another way, this group of people may be considered to be enjoying this game called SAO, so I've never especially begrudged them for this. However, since I've refused to join their guild twice, our relationship can't be considered good.

Right now, the 7 of them looked like they're surrounding me by forming a semicircle with my back facing the transfer gate, but they must have calculated the distance before. This distance wouldn't cause players to feel that they're «boxed» and unable to move, but if I wanted to move out, I'd

definitely touch one of them, and I'd naturally think first if I were to make such a rude act. This formed a «suspicious cornering» situation.

I really endured the urge to sigh and changed my tone to ask Schmitt,

"I'll answer all I know. What do you want to ask about?"

"The PK incident inside the area on the 57th floor in the evening."

I'd already expected that answer as I nodded, leaned on the stone wall and folded my arms in front of my chest before using an eye expression to prompt him to continue.

"I heard that it wasn't a duel...was it?"

He used a deep magnetic-like voice to ask, and I thought for a while before shrugging my shoulders and answered,

"That's what I can confirm. No one at the scene saw the window indicating the winner. Of course, there may be some sort of reason why no one at the scene managed to find out."

"..."

Schmitt's squarish jaw immediately closed up, and the armor below his neck let out a sound.

The members of the «Divine Dragons Alliance» have to wear armor with silver and blue as the base color. The 2m length long-spear on his back was showing itself fully as the sharp tip had their guild's triangular flag tied on it.

After a short moment of silence, Schmitt said with a deeper voice,

"I heard that the player who was killed is called «Kains»...is that true?"

"The friend who witnessed this entire incident did say this. I've just checked Black Iron Palace. The date and cause of death are exactly the same."

I saw his thick neck gulp for a bit, and finally started to feel suspicious. I tilted my head and asked him,

"Do you know the deceased?"

"...None of your business."

"Oi oi, why is it that you're the only one who can ask..."

I just spoke halfway through when he suddenly growled at me angrily,

"YOU'RE NOT A COP, RIGHT!? IT SEEMS THAT YOU DID LOTS OF INVESTIGATIONS SECRETLY WITH THE SUB-LEADER OF THE KOB, BUT YOU TWO DON'T HAVE THE RIGHT TO KEEP ALL THE INFORMATION TO YOURSELF!"

He let out a roar that even those outside the plaza could hear, and the other members around him showed troubled looks as they looked around. It seems that Schmitt never told them the specifics and just wanted them to form numbers here.

In that case, it seemed that the «Divine Dragons Alliance» itself may not be involved in this incident, but Schmitt himself was. As my mind memorized this, a right hand covered with a metal gauntlet reached out in front of me.

"I know you took the PK weapon from the scene of the crime. That's enough investigations you've done. Hand it over to me."

"Oi oi oi..."

Such an act is obviously a breach of etiquette.

In SAO, any unequipped weapon dropped on the ground, or a weapon stabbed into a monster and taken away will have its owner's data erased after 300 seconds. The item then belonged to the person who picked it up, no matter whether it's based on the system or generally. That black short spear's owner data was removed once it took Kains life, and so, based on the system, it belongs to me now.

It wasn't like there weren't situations where people forced other people to hand over free weapons — but that spear was a weapon and critical evidence. Since I'm not a cop or a military policeman, so I have no intention of keeping it to myself.

Thus, I just openly sighed and waved my hand to call out the item window.

I used my right hand to grab onto the materialized black short spear, and thought of acting cool as I stabbed it hard into the stone floor between Schmitt and I.

KLANG! The short spear let out a large spark and stabbed into the ground. Schmitt was shocked by my action as he took half a step back,

I looked at it closely again, and found that the design of this weapon was really spine-chilling. Of course, this weapon that was designed to kill players isn't anything good. I looked away from the drop only I could see, and used a very soft voice to say to this long-spear user,

"I saved you time on inspecting this item. The name of this weapon is «Guilty Thorn», and the blacksmith that made it was «Grimlock»."

There was an obvious reaction.

Schmitt immediately widened his narrowed eyes as his mouth opened wide, letting out a hoarse panting voice from within.

Undoubtedly, this bro who looks like a sports athlete must have known the blacksmith Grimlock and the victim Kains, and they went through «some incident» together.

If that was the motive for killing Kains, the murder incident in the «area» isn't something I feared, a killer that just PKs randomly and indifferently. I really wanted to know what happened in the past, but even if I asked Schmitt directly, he probably wouldn't answer me honestly.

Just while I was thinking of what to do, that arm wearing the thick metal gauntlet straightened stiffly and pulled the spear out from the ground.

Schmitt crudely opened the item window and threw the short spear in, as though to get rid of it, then quickly turned away.

Then, he, whose long spear was facing me, left a rather classic threatening line.

"...Don't bother randomly investigating any further. Let's go!"

The guys of the Divine Dragons Alliance quickly headed towards the transfer gate and disappeared.

—Then, what should I do?

Part 4

"People from the DDA?"

On hearing my report, Asuna couldn't help but frown.

DDA is the initialism for «Divine Dragons Alliance», the simplified term for the guild. The name had some form of intimidation and pressure that people would naturally avoid, but it doesn't work on the sub-leader of the KoB Asuna.

On the day after the incident, Sakura month, 23rd day, the weather generator seemed to be in a bad mood immediately as it had been drizzling since morning. Actually in Aincrad, the sky is covered by the base of the higher level, so it's impossible to have rain, but to really put it that way, there can't possibly be sunlight in the day.

At 9am in the morning. Asuna and I met at the transfer gate on the 57th floor, where the incident happened, and we arrived at a nearby café to have breakfast and sort out the information we had up till now. The biggest issue we had in our discussion was obviously the Divine Dragons Alliance member Schmitt who ambushed me outside the transfer gate and forcefully took information and the murder weapon away from me.

"Ahh~ speaking of which, there's really this person. The big long spear user, right?"

"That's right. He gives the vibe that he's the chairman of a high school snatchaway club."

"There's no such club."

Asuna immediately refuted this little inspiration of humor I have had since morning, and seemed to be thinking about something as she cupped the mug with café au lait.

"...Don't tell me that guy is the culprit."

"I can't conclude that boldly, but probably not. If he took the murder weapon back because he's scared that someone found the clue, he might as well not be there. I think that the spear is something left behind by the culprit."

"I see...you're right. That killing method and the name of the weapon is «Guilty Thorn»...instead of calling it a normal PK, it's more suitable to call it a «public execution»..."

On hearing Asuna mutter in a depressed manner, I nodded to agree with her.

This isn't a random PK, but an execution on Kains. And there must have been something between Kains, Grimlock and Schmitt.

I kept my volume down and said out the conclusion I got from these clues.

"In other words — the motive is «revenge», no, «judgment». That Kains-san once committed some form of sin, and he was killed as «punishment». This should be what the killer is trying to get at."

"In other words, Schmitt shouldn't be the culprit, but the one the criminal is after, is it? He did «something» with Kains-san, and started to panic and take action after his partner was killed..."

"Once we know that past, we'll likely know who the culprit is. However...this may just be an act by a criminal. Let's not get too subjective for now."

"You're right, especially when we're asking Yolko."

Asuna and I nodded at the same time, and we then checked the time right now. It's 10am in the morning, and we headed to a nearby inn to ask Yolko, who was staying there, what happened.

There's still some time after I finished the simple breakfast of black bread and vegetable soup, and I casually looked at the KoB sub-leader opposite me.

Perhaps she was about to deal with something personal as she's not wearing the knight outfit with the white base and the red picture. Her top was a shirt with pink and grey stripes with a black leather vest over it, and her bottom was a black miniskirt with laces beside it. On her feet were grey stockings.

Also, she's wearing pink enamel shoes and a pink beret. It just seems that she's been putting in effort to dress up — of course, perhaps all female players dressed up normally like this. To be honest, I have no idea about the current trend of clothing, so I can't tell at all. No matter what, I have no idea how much her attire cost.

Besides, there's no need to deliberately dress up when investigating a murder case. As I blankly thought about this, Asuna suddenly looked up, and then quickly turned her head aside.

"...What are you looking at?"

"Eh...ah, nothing..."

Of course, I couldn't possibly ask her how much this attire cost, but if I just said randomly things like those clothes are cute and really suit you, I might either anger her or get laughed at by her, so I just thought of an excuse.

"Un...I'm thinking, is that thick stuff nice?"

As I asked, Asuna lowered her head to look at the mysterious thick soup she's using her spoon to scoop up. She stared at me with a delicate expression, and then sighed heavily.

"...Not at all."

The rapier user whispered and pushed the soup aside, coughed a few times, and then changed her tone and said,

"I've been thinking yesterday, about the «Continuous Pierce damage DOT» from that black short spear..."

Speaking of which, it seems this was the first time I ever saw this girl without her rapier equipped. Having noticed that, I nodded.

"Un?"

"For example, if a piercing type weapon is used to stab someone outside the area, and if the player enters the area, how is the continuous damage calculated? Do you know?"

"Un...well..."

I can't help but consider. It's true that I've never had this kind of situation before, and of course, I never exactly thought of exactly what happened.

"I don't know...but the continuous poison or burn damage will disappear once the player enters the area, right? Piercing damage should be the same too, isn't it?"

"But what happens if the weapon is stabbed into the body? Will it be pulled out automatically?"

"Even if it's like that, it's a little weird...un, we have some time, so let's experiment on this."

Asuna immediately widened her eyes the moment she heard me say this,

"Ex, experiment?"

"Seeing is believing."

I tossed out an idiom that's used a little strangely here, and then summoned the map of the streets to find the nearest gate from here.

The area outside the main street area of the 57th floor «Marten» is grassland filled with some craggy old trees.

A few weeks ago, this was a road I went past countless times when this was still the frontline, and now, my memories are fuzzy. Of course, it may be because there're new sprouts coming out as spring comes, but basically, ever since the clearing group broke through this level, I've basically stopped coming to the training area outside the area.

We continued on in the slight drizzle, and once we stepped out of the streets, the warning words «Outer Field» appeared in our sights. The monsters won't immediately come over to attack, but my heart just felt tense.

Asuna equipped that rapier she normally carried at her waist, and then shook the water droplets hanging on her bangs in a somewhat impatient manner before asking in an intrigued voice,

"Then...how are you going to experiment?"

"Like this?"

I rummage through my waist pocket, found the 3 «Throwing Picks» I normally equipped myself with, and pulled one out.

All the weapons that exist in Aincrad can be classified under slashing, thrust, smash and pierce. My main one-handed weapon is a slashing weapon, and Asuna's weapon is a thrust type. Maces and warhammers are smashing weapons, and the short spear that killed Kains and the long spear Schmitt had are of course piercing types.

However, a few throwing weapons actually have a vague classification. Of all the throwing weapons, the boomerang or the sickles are slashing types;

the flying daggers are stabbing types, and my throwing picks are piercing types. That's right. It looks like a large metal needle that's only 12cm long, but this pick is really a piercing weapon, which means it can create some minor piercing damage.

It's too stupid to just waste my equipment's durability just to test this on my HP, so I took off my left glove and used the pick in my right now to stab at my bare hand.

"Wa...WAIT A SEC!"

A sharp shout caused my hand to stop.

I turn my head around, and Asuna had already opened her item window and got ready to take out a very expensive healing crystal. I couldn't help but smile wryly and said,

"Isn't it too exaggerated? I'll only lose about 1 to 2% of my HP when I get stabbed in the hand by such a pick."

"Idiot! Anything can happen outside the area! Party with me and let me see your HP!"

Asuna angrily stated as she seemed to be lecturing a stupid little brother, and then opened a window and invited me to a party. I cringed my head back a little and immediately pressed on the accept button, and right below my HP bar at the top left hand corner, I could see Asuna's small HP bar.

Now that I think about this, this is the first time I'm teaming up with this girl. Of course, we've met many times as part of the clearing group, but she is the sub-leader of the strongest guild, and I'm just a small solo player, so we haven't had much chance to talk to each other.

Unexpectedly, it's so easy now, and I'm partying with her alone. Just a while back, we're having disagreements over defeating a boss, and even had a 1 v 1 duel.

Asuna held onto the pink crystal as she looked tense and got ready. I can't help but look at her face.

"...What is it?"

"Nothing...well, I didn't think that you'd worry about me like that..."

The moment I said that, Asuna's white face was immediately dyed into the same color as the crystal. She then angrily said to me again,

"Of...of course not! Wait, it's not exactly like th...ARGH! JUST STAB IF YOU WANT TO DO SO!!!"

EHHH!? I immediately grabbed the pick again.

"I, I'm going to stab then."

I declared, and forcefully took a deep breath——

I then proceeded to do the beginner level throwing skill «Single Shot» at my extended left hand.

My two fingers on my right hand held onto the pick, and with a slightly dark light effect, it pierced through my hand.

With an impact, the uncomfortable numbness and slight pain passed through my nerves.

The HP bar deducted more HP than what I expected, and I lost about 3%. Now that I remember, I swapped the ordinary picks with a rare drop.

I endured this uncomfortable feeling and turned to look at the metal needle that's stabbed into my hand. 5 seconds later, the red light effect flashed again, and the HP dropped by 0.5%. This is the «Continuous Pierce Damage DOT».

"...HURRY UP AND ENTER THE AREA!"

Asuna's tense voice prompted me, and I immediately nodded and stared at the HP bar and the pick before heading to the gate leading to the area.

The moment my feet stepped from the wet grassland to the hard stone floor, my sights see the words «Inner Area».

And then —— the HP bar stopped dropping.

Every five seconds, there would be a red light effect, but the hit points showed no sign of decreasing. As expected, any damage would be nullified inside the area.

"...It stopped."

Asuna whispered, and I nodded and agreed with her.

"The weapon's still embedded in me, but the continuous damage stopped, huh?"

"How does it feel?"

"It's still on my body. This is probably to prevent an idiot stabbed with such a weapon to enter the area directly..."

"You're that kind of idiot now."

On hearing that cold telling-off, I could only cringe my neck back and pull the pick out. The uncomfortable feeling passed through my nerves, causing my body to tense up. There's no sign of any wounds on the back of my left hand, but the icy metallic touch still remained on it. I couldn't help but blow the back of my hand and said,

"The damage did stop...in that case, why did Kains die...? Is it the unique characteristic of the weapon...or some unknown skill...TWAAHHH!?"

The reason for the final shout at the end is—

Asuna suddenly used both hands to grab my left hand and pulled it in front of her chest before forcefully holding onto it.

"You...wha...what...?"

After a few seconds, the sub-leader let go of the hand and glanced at me before saying,

"The remaining feeling of the damage disappeared, right?"

"——U, un. Well, thanks."

The reason why my heart raced is most likely because I was shocked.

It's definitely just like that, definitely.

10am. Yolko walked out from the inn. She looks like she didn't sleep at all as she continued to blink as she bowed to Asuna and me.

I nodded back at her and first apologized,

"Sorry for bothering you when your friend just..."

"No worries..."

This girl who should be slightly older than me swayed her deep blue hair as she shook her head.

"It's alright. I want to hurry up and find the culprit too..."

After that, she turned her eyes to Asuna, and immediately widened her eyes.

"Wow, that's amazing. Are these clothes all one-make goods from Ashley-san's shop? This is the first time I'm seeing someone dressed up fully in that!"

...Another name? I wondered and asked,

"Who's that?"

"Don't you know?"

Yolko looked at me with an expression of disbelief, and then explained,

"Ashley-san is a super tailor who's the first one in Aincrad to master the sewing skill to level 1000! If you don't get the rarest and highest quality materials, she won't make them for you!"

"I see!"

I'm thoroughly impressed. Even someone like me who's been fighting like an idiot only managed to improve the mastery skill of one-handed swords to level 1000.

I can't help but turn my gaze to Asuna and look at her from top to bottom, and the rapier user's face immediately tensed up, screaming before walking forward.

"It...it's not like that!"

——I have no idea what that was about at all.

Just like that, Asuna lead Yolko, who seemed to realize something, and I, who don't understand what's going on at all, to that restaurant where our meal was interrupted.

It's still early, so there aren't any signs of other players inside. We sat on the inner most table and measured the distance from here to the door. The distance is so far away, if we didn't shout out, it was impossible for people

outside the shop to hear us. I always thought in the past that we just needed to hide in an inn room and lock it up before saying our secrets, but recently, I learnt that it's even easier to let those with great eavesdropping abilities to hear all our conversations.

As Yolko had already taken breakfast, the three of us only ordered drinks before getting into the topic at hand.

"First our report...last night, we went to check the «Monument of Life» at the Black Iron Palace. Kains-san definitely died there."

On hearing my words, Yolko gasped for a short while, closed her eyes, nodded and said,

"I see...thank you for deliberately going over to such a far place to check..."

"No worries. Besides, we want to know about another name."

Asuna immediately shook her head, and then raised the first important question.

"Erm, Yolko-san. I'm going to ask you some names you may not have heard of before...one of them should be a blacksmith called «Grimlock». The other one is a long spear user called...«Schmitt»."

Yolko's lowered head suddenly jerked.

Soon after, she did an ambiguous but definite action.

"Yes, I know them. Kains and I were members of the same guild in the past."

This tiny voice caused Asuna and I to look at each other.

Is that so? In that case, we have to come up with another hypothesis—did «some incident» happen in that guild in the past to cause this incident?

This time, I'm the one who raised the second question.

"Well, Yolko-san. I know this may be tough for you to answer, but I hope you can tell the truth so that we can solve this case. We feel that this incident has something to do with some form of «revenge» or «judgment». Did Kains-san get killed because of what happened in that guild and was hated by the criminal as revenge...? I've asked this yesterday as well, but I hope that you can think through this again. Are there any clues or anything suspicious...?"

This time, she didn't answer immediately.

Yolko still kept her head down. After a long moment of silence, she used her trembling hands to pick up the cup to take a sip of tea before nodding.

"...Yes...there really is something. I'm really sorry for not saying it...that's because I really want to forget it...and I don't want to remember it. Also, I thought that there's no relationship between these two things, so I didn't say it out immediately...but I'm willing to do so now. It's because of «that incident» that caused our guild to be wiped out.

—The guild's name was «Golden Apple». This guild was a weak guild that had only 8 players, and their aim wasn't to clear, but to hunt safely to earn money for lodging and food.

But, half a year ago...autumn last year.

We, who entered an ordinary dungeon in the middle floors, suddenly met a monster we had never seen before. It was a completely black cricket, fast and hard to identify...we immediately knew that it was a rare monster. Everyone excitedly chased after it...and someone threw out a knife. Coincidentally, it hit that monster by luck and defeated it.

The drop was a ring that looked normal, but after inspection, everyone was shocked. It could increase 20 points of agility. I think this is a magic item that's not even dropped on the front lines.

What happened next...I guess you should be able to guess what happened.

We split up into two groups, one where the guild members would use it, and one where we would sell it for money. After a very rough argument where we nearly started fighting, we voted. In the end, the vote count was 5 to 3 in favor of selling it. The middle floor merchants couldn't handle such a rare item, so the guild leader took the ring to the bustling city on the frontlines and asked the others to sell it at the auction ring.

We had to spend quite some time investigating the market price and a reliable merchant to auction it, so the leader intended to stay a night on the frontlines. I was excitedly waiting for the leader to bring the money back once the auction is over. Even if we had to divide it into eight, the sum would be pretty large, so I've been looking at the records to see what

weapons I would buy from which shops or what personal branded clothing I could buy...at this point, I never expect...things ended up like this...

...The leader didn't come back.

It had been past an hour since the following night when we promised to meet up, and the leader didn't bring any news. There wasn't any response even after we tracked where she was, and the leader never responded to all the messages we sent over.

It was impossible for the leader to take the treasure and run away, so we had a bad feeling about it. Some people went to the «Monument of Life» in Black Iron Palace to check on the situation.

And in the end...

Yolko bit her lips and shook her head sideways.

Asuna and I don't know what to say to console her.

Luckily — or we can say, Yolko soon wiped away the tears and looked up, and then said with a trembling yet rather clear voice,

"The time of death was the night the leader took the ring to the higher levels, past midnight at 1 AM. The cause of death was...Continuous Pierce Damage DOT."

"...She probably wouldn't take it out of the area if it's such a rare item. In that case...it's a «Sleeping PK»?"

I murmured, and Asuna seemed to agree with me.

"Half a year ago, not a lot of people knew about such a killing method, and a lot of people stayed overnight in public places to save lodging fees."

"The inns near the frontlines are rather expensive too...but this shouldn't be a coincidence. The one who killed the leader...should be a player who knew about this ring...which means..."

With her eyes closed, Yolko nodded her head slightly.

"The «Golden Apple» guild had only 7 people left...so it was one of us. Of course, we thought about that, but...we couldn't track where everyone was...so we started to suspect each other, and the guild soon collapsed."

The bitter silence covered the top of the table.

——It's really an uncomfortable story to hear.

——However, this really is something that can possibly happen.

It's not rare to see a harmonious guild collapse without signs of disharmony because of a rare once in ten thousands drop they got. The reason why we often don't hear about such gossip is because the people involved mostly want to forget about these things.

However, there's still a question I had to ask Yolko.

I faced this older girl, who's lowering her head in a depressed manner, summoned my courage and asked,

"I would like you to tell me something. The names of the three people who were against selling the ring are...?"

Yolko was silent for several seconds, and then seemed to decide on things as she lifted her head up and answered clearly,

"Kains, Schmitt...and me."

——This answer more or less surprised me. Yolko wordlessly watched me blink and continued on with some self-deprecating tone,

"It's just that the reason I opposed it is different. Kains and Schmitt were frontlines warriors and wanted to use it for themselves, and for me...it's because I was starting to go out with Kains. I was putting my feelings for my boyfriend as a priority rather than the benefit of the guild. It's stupid, right?"

Yolko then closed her mouth and looked at the table. At this moment, Asuna, who had been keeping quiet, suddenly asked with a gentle tone,

"Yolko-san. Did you...still keep in contact with Kains-san after the guild was disbanded...?"

Yolko still looks down as she shook her head slightly.

"...As the guild disbanded, we naturally split up. We occasionally meet up to chat, that's all...if we stayed with each other for too long, we'll just think about that ring incident. It was the same yesterday. We only agreed to have a meal...yet such a thing happened before we had it..."

"I see...I suppose you've been hit badly. Sorry for asking so many things you don't want to mention about."

Yolko shakes simply her head.

"It's alright. And...about Grimlock..."

I inadvertently sit up after hearing her name.

"...He was the sub-leader of the «Golden Apple», and the «husband» of the guild leader. Of course, we're talking about SAO itself."

"Eh...the leader was a girl?"

"Un. The leader's really strong...but I'm talking about the middle areas...she's an outstanding one-handed swordsman, beautiful and smart...I really admired her. So...even till now, I still can't believe that the leader would actually be killed by such an underhanded method like the «Sleeping PK»..."

"...Grimlock must be really shocked then. The lover he's married to was..."

After hearing Asuna mutter, Yolko's body jerked.

"Yes. He was a very gentle swordsmith before this...but after that incident happened, it feels like he became really violent...he never contacted anyone after the guild disbanded, and his whereabouts are unknown."

"I see...sorry for asking you such troubling questions, but can you please tell me one last thing? About yesterday...do you think the one who killed Kains-san may be Grimlock? actually, the black short spear stabbed into Kains-san's chest...we inspected it and found it to be made by Grimlock."

This question is actually asking her whether Kains may be the real murderer of the «ring incident» half a year ago.

Yolko pondered for a while and then nods her head with a slight action.

"...It's true...there is such a possibility. But Kains and I never killed the leader and snatched the ring. We can't prove our innocence...but if the killer yesterday was Grimlock...he might want to kill the three people who were opposed to selling the ring, Kains, Schmitt and me..."

Asuna and I sent Yolko back to the inn she was at and handed her several days worth of food, telling her not to leave the room no matter what.

We considered the difficulties of her not leaving, so we moved her to the executive suite that's composed of 3 rooms linked to each other and paid a week's deposit first. However, we can't depend on playing computer games to kill time in Aincrad, and there's a limit to being in a room when we're bored, so we promised her that we'll solve this case as soon as possible and left the inn.

"...Actually, I'll feel more secure if we can move her to the KoB headquarters..."

If we move Yolko over to the KoB headquarters and ask them for protection, we'll have to tell the entire guild exactly what happened. In other words, the details of the «Golden Apple» disbanding will be revealed. I guess Yolko refused us so as to protect Kains' honor.

As we arrived back at the transfer gate plaza, the bell indicating 11am rang.

The rain finally stopped, but there's a thick layer of mist starting to form. I looked at Asuna, who's dressed in black and dark pink through the mist, and said,

"Then, let's..."

"...?"

Asuna felt a little bewildered after seeing that I stopped midway through my sentence.

It's too late — but I conclude that we should say something, so I deliberately coughed a few times before indicating,

"Ahem, nothing. Un—well...that get-up really suits you."

Ohh, I said it now. Now I'm a first-class gentleman.

The moment I said that, Asuna immediately gave a horrified look. She quickly pointed her right index finger out at me and poked it into my chest, angrily growling,

"Ugh—! YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO SAY THAT WHEN WE FIRST MET!"

After saying that, Asuna declares, I'M GOING TO CHANGE! and quickly turned back at a very fast speed. The side of her face was already red, but this must be because she's angry.

I don't understand. I really don't understand the so-called woman's heart.

Asuna used the empty house nearby to change into her knightly attire, swung her long hair back and quickly headed for me before saying,

"Then, what are we going to do next?"

"Ah, okay. There are several options...the first is to head to the middle levels to hear about this Grimlock guy and find where he is. The second is to interview the other members of the Golden Apple and verify Yolko-san's words. The third...is to investigate how Kains-san was killed. That's likely to be all."

"Un..."

Asuna folded her arms in front of her chest and started to ponder.

"The first option is too inefficient with just the two of us. Based on our current hypotheses, if the criminal is really Grimlock, he would be hiding somewhere already. The second option...the other members are also involved, so we can't verify Yolko-san's words..."

"Eh? Why?"

"What'll happen if we get conflicting information from what Yolko-san said just now? We can't tell which side is telling the truth, and it'll be more chaotic for us. We need objective views to help us make our decision..."

"Then...the third option's the only thing left."

We looked at each other and nodded.

It's a little sorry to Yolko, but Asuna and I are so into this case not because we're trying to find out the truth behind the «Golden Apple» leader's death, but to find out the «Inside area PK» method that killed Kains.

Based on what we could see last night, the fact is that we could only confirm that «Continuous Pierce Damage DOT outside the area can never be carried over inside the area». That's why we have to thoroughly discuss if there are other possibilities.

"However...I still wish someone more knowledgeable can help us out..."

I muttered, and Asuna immediately frowned and answered,

"Even so, it's really unfair to Yolko-san if we just spread information randomly. Besides, there's no one that's trustworthy enough and is more familiar with the SAO system than us..."

"...Ah."

I suddenly thought of a player, and then immediately flicked a finger.

"There is someone like that. Let's call that guy out."

"Who?"

I said the answer, and Asuna's eyes widened like longans.

Part 5

I can be certain that the guy wasn't attracted by the 'I'll treat you' clause, but I was really shocked when that guy really appeared 30 minutes after Asuna messaged him.

On seeing that burly body come out silently from the central transfer gate of Algade, many pedestrians moving around the plaza raised a commotion. This guy had a dark red robe and platinum hair that's tied up, and he did not have any weapons on his waist and back—making one even associate him with a «magician» class that didn't exist in SAO. The leader of the «Knights of the Blood» guild and the strongest swordsman, the «Holy Sword» Heathcliff, saw us, and immediately raised his eyebrows before moving over like he's gliding.

Asuna immediately bowed agilely and quickly explained,

"Leader, sorry for calling you out here all of a sudden! This idio...no, this person didn't listen to me and insisted on you coming over no matter what...!"

"It's alright. I just wanted to have lunch too anyway. Besides, it's rare to have the «Black Swordsman» Kirito-kun to get a chance to treat me anyway. I have to attend a meeting with the members of the equipment group in the evening, so I can meet up with you now."

Heathcliff said with a smooth tenor voice that had an iron will in it, and I looked up at him and shrugged, saying,

"You managed to block that monster in the boss battle on this floor for ten minutes, so I can thank you by treating you. I can also tell you some of the more interesting latest news."

I brought the leaders of the strongest guild KoB, and lead them to the weirdest looking restaurant I knew of in Algade. I didn't really like the food here, but the overall atmosphere created by the restaurant seemed to touch my emotional chords for some reason.

After moving around in the maze-like narrow alley for about 5 minutes, I turned right, headed down the stairs, headed left and climbed up the stairs. As that shop finally appeared in the slightly dim space, Asuna said,

"...You're going to lead me out too, or else I won't be able to head back to the plaza."

"I heard that there are several people who didn't bring their teleport crystals around and got lost, and after moving around for half a day, they still couldn't get out."

I deliberately showed a smile and scared Asuna, and Heathcliff immediately quipped,

"You just need to pay an NPC on the streets 10 col and they'll send you to the plaza. Of course, if you don't even have this money..."

After saying this, he gently clapped his hands together and quickly walked into the shop. Asuna gave a bewildered look as we followed him.

The cramped shop was as empty as I had expected. After sitting down at a cheap 4 seater table, I ordered 3 «Algade Noodles» from the gloomy looking shop owner and drank up the iced water in the glass. Asuna sat on my left and said with a delicate expression,

"Why is it...like we're doing a cross-examination..."

"You're thinking too much. Then, let's get straight to the point to avoid delaying the busy leader-dono."

I looked up and saw Heathcliff being all nonchalant as I said that.

Asuna first explained what happened last night clearly. While listening to her, the «Holy Sword»'s expression didn't seem to change at all, and only twitched his eyebrows on hearing Kains' death.

"...That's how it is. It's somewhat troublesome, but I hope you can give us some suggestions, leader..."

Asuna concluded. Heathcliff drank another gulp of water, and then answers, un,

"Then, let me hear your hypothesis, Kirito-kun. What's your view about this «Inside area murder» method?"

On hearing the topic being directed at me, I put down the hand supporting my face and immediately raised three fingers.

"Un...I guess there are about 3 possible methods. First, an actual inner area duel. Second, combining a known method with a system loophole, and third...an unknown skill or equipment that can cause the Anti-Criminal Code to lose its effect."

"You can forget about the third possibility."

Heathcliff immediately concluded, and these words caused me to stare at his face. Asuna was like me, blinking a few times before asking,

"...Leader, how can you be so certain?"

"Think about it. If you're the developer of this game, would you design such a skill or weapon?"

"Un...probably not."

I answered.

"Why is that?"

I looked back at the yellowish-bronze eyes that had a magnetic effect, and continued,

"That's because...it's too imbalanced. I really don't want to admit it, but the rules of SAO are rather fair. Of course, your «Unique Skill» can't be considered as such."

I curled my lips up while adding that last sentence, and Heathcliff silently smiled back at me in the same manner.

Deep inside, I was shocked, but my expression didn't change at all. Even if he's the leader of the KoB guild, he can't possibly know that I recently got «that» in my skill window.

Asuna looked back and forth at Heathcliff and me while we exchanged weird smiles with each other, sighed and shook her head before interrupting,

"Either way, discussing this third possibility is a waste of time because we can't confirm it. Then...let's examine the first assumption, the possibility of a proper duel."

"Alright. But...the shop here really is really slow in serving food."

I shrugged at Heathcliff, who was looking deep into the counter.

"As far as I know, the shop owner here is the most unenthusiastic in Aincrad. This is also one of the shop's specialties. Besides, ice water can be refilled without limit here."

I took up the cheap kettle and continued to pour ice water into leader-dono's cup in front of him.

"——If the player dies inside the circle, it must be because of a duel, un...this can be said to be common knowledge. But I can confirm that there was no sign of any window indicating a victor. Are there those kind of duels?"

At this moment, Asuna, who was sitting beside me, suddenly tilted her head.

"...Speaking of which, I've never noticed this before. Where does the window that indicates the winner appear?"

"Eh? Well..."

Actually, I've never thought about this question before. But Heathcliff immediately answered without hesitation,

"It'll appear in the middle of the duel participants. Or, if both sides are ten meters apart when the victor's decided, there'll be two windows appearing at the closest point to them."

"...To think you know this kind of rules. That means...even if it's far away, it'll appear at most 5m away from Kains."

My mind recalled the scene of that tragedy, and I shook my head and said,

"There were no windows appearing in the surrounding space, I can be certain of that since there were a lot of witnesses. Also, if it appeared behind Kains inside the church, it means that the criminal was still inside the church at that time. However, Asuna, who ran into the church just before Kains died, didn't see anyone. That makes it really weird."

"Speaking of which, there were no windows inside the church."

Asuna added.

Hmm. I wonder. Then——

"...So...it's not a duel?"

As I muttered, the already pitiful atmosphere in this restaurant seemed to become even heavier.

"...Did you choose the wrong shop...?"

Asuna muttered, seemingly trying to change the thought process here as she finished up the ice water inside her glass before putting it back on the table with a klang. I then immediately fill her glass with ice water. She thanked me with a vague expression, and then raised two fingers before saying,

"The second possibility is the only possibility left. «System Loophole»...but I just feel that something is wrong with this."

"What's wrong about it?"

"«Continuous Pierce Damage»."

There were toothpicks on the table, which were unnecessary in the first place — it was impossible to dirty our teeth in this world — Asuna drew one and used this pocket-sized weapon to throw into the air.

"I feel that the short spear wasn't just used to showcase a public execution. Perhaps he has to rely on continuous damage to create a PK inside the area...that's what I think."

"Un. I feel the same."

I nod, and then shook my head,

"But didn't we experiment this before? Even if we use a piercing weapon out the area to stab through, the damage would stop once we moved into the area."

"That is when they walk over. Then...what if they used the «Return Crystal»? He set up a crystal in a small room inside the church to exit and then moved from outside the area to that place...would the damage stop as well?"

"Of course."

Heathcliff's sharp voice answered.

"No matter whether it's walking or teleporting or even being thrown into the area...once anyone enters the street area, the «Code» will work without exception."

"Wait. This «street area» you're talking about refers only to the ground or the inside of the buildings, right? What about in the air?"

I suddenly had a weird imagination when I raised this question.

That rope. If Kains, who was stabbed through with the short spear, was hung on the neck by the rope, what would happen if he was immediately hung and stabbed through without touching the ground before being pushed out through the corridor...

This question caused even Heathcliff to hesitate.

But two seconds later, his tied longhair swayed sideways.

"No — strictly speaking, the «area» extends from the streets and above until the cover, the base of the next level. The moment someone moves into that 3-dimensional space, the «Code» will protect that person. So even if someone sets the exit 100m above the streets and move from outside the area into the air, there won't be any fall damage. However, one will have to experience some unpleasant mental impact."

"Is that so~"

Asuna and I let out voices of amazement.

Of course, we're not amazed by the shape of the «area» region, but by Heathcliff's well-versed knowledge and memory. I had the thought of does someone need to know so many things just to be a guild leader, but I immediately denied that thought the moment a certain bearded katana user appeared in my mind.

However——

If that is the case, even if there's a «Continuous Pierce Damage» existing, since Kains is inside the area, this damage should have stopped. In other words, there should be another source of damage on that guy's HP other than the short spear «Guilty Thorn» —— are there no other loopholes?

I continued to think, and slowly stated my guess.

"...On the Monument of Life, the time of Kains death was there, and the cause of death is clearly stated there —— «Continuous Pierce Damage». Also, what was left at Kains' death scene was that black short spear."

"Yeah. It's really hard to imagine the criminal using another weapon."

"Listen to me..."

My mind immediately thought of that flinging-like feeling when a powerful monster dealt a critical hit, and continued,

"Once someone is hit by a powerful critical hit, what will happen to their HP bar?"

Asuna immediately gives me a don't-you-already-know-this expression and answered,

"Of course it will decrease by a lot."

"It means there's a problem with how it decreases. The HP won't drop in one huge shot but slowly decrease from right to left, right? In other words, there is some delay in the attack until the HP is worn out."

As I said this, Asuna finally understood what I was trying to get at. But Heathcliff still looked emotionless, which made it hard to tell what he was actually thinking.

I continued to look at both of them, and then waved my hand to say,

"For example...that spear hit outside the area caused Kains' HP to drop from max to zero. From the equipment, I can tell that that guy's a tank, so his HP should be rather high. The HP bar will then drop from max to zero, un...it's not surprising even if it takes 5 seconds to wear out. The culprit must have used this time to teleport back through a portal and sent Kains into the church to hang from the window..."

"Wa...wait a second."

Asuna keeps her voice down and interrupts me.

"Kains is not of the clearing group, but he's an elite player amongst the middle levels. Using just a single sword skill to reduce this person's HP down to zero is impossible for me...and for you!"

"Un, that's true."

I nodded slightly.

"Even if we used a «Vorpall Strike» to deal a critical damage, we probably can't drop his HP to half. But in SAO, there are thousands of players. We can't deny that there are high leveled swordsmen who don't belong to the clearing group...those that Asuna and I don't know of."

"So what you're trying to say is...we don't know whether Grimlock was the one who killed Kains with that short spear or a «red» player he requested, but that guy has the ability to take down a fully-armored tank...?"

I shrugged to affirm this, and looked at the guy opposite me with an attitude of waiting for a «teacher» to grade.

Heathcliff's half-closed eyes stared at the table, and after a while, he nodded,

"In terms of method, that's not impossible. It's true that once you carry out a hit outside the area to drop the HP down to zero and open a portal to move the target over, you can create a so-called «Inside area PK»."

Oh? So I'm right? The moment I thought this was the case, that clear voice added, "However..."

"...I suppose you should know. A piercing weapon's main characteristic is the length, followed by the armor piercing ability. In terms of pure power, it's not as strong as a smashing weapon or a slashing one. If even a heavy long spear can't do it, it's even less possible for a mere short spear."

This really blew a hole in my reasoning.

I pouted like a grumbling kid, and on seeing this, Heathcliff smiled and continued,

"If someone was to use a short spear that is not exactly a high-rank item to take down a middle-level tank...I think that person will have to be at least level 100 to do so."

"100!!???"

Asuna immediately cried out in panic.

The rapier user widened her ground-yellow eyes and turned to look at Heathcliff, and then me, and then back and forth again, before shaking her head and saying,

"No...it's impossible for such a person to exist. We've been training for so long, so you shouldn't have forgotten, right? If it's level 100...it's impossible to do so without training 24 hours a day on the frontlines dungeons."

"That's what I feel too."

Since the strongest guild KoB leaders deny this possibility, how can this puny little solo player raise a logical argument? In fact, even I, who is basically the highest levelled player in the clearing group, is only just above level 80.

"...The-then it may not be the player's ability, but the strength of the sword skill, for example...a second person with a «Unique Skill» that appeared or something..."

The moment I said this, the leader shrugged his shoulders that were covered with the dark red cape, and then smiled,

"Fu...if such a player really exists, I'll definitely ask him to join the KoB immediately."

As those unpredictable eyes stared at me, I could only give up on such a possibility and leaned the cheap chair's back.

"Hn~ I thought this might work. What is left is..."

Just when I was about to say the stupid statement 'request a boss-level monster in the training grounds to beat Kains', a figure stealthily appeared beside me.

"Sorry to keep you waiting..."

The NPC shop owner said with a lazy tone as he served 3 bowls of noodles from the rectangular tray. The bangs under the oil-stained chef's hat were too long, and I couldn't see his face clearly.

Asuna was already used to seeing NPC shop workers on the other floors who were clean, polite and serious in their work, and was dumbstruck as she could only watch the shop owner leave slowly and return to the counter.

I picked up the cheap wash-free chopsticks on the table, PAK, split them apart and pulled a bowl of noodles over. Asuna did the same thing as me and whispered,

"...What's this? Ramen?"

"Sho-should be something similar?"

I said so, and pulled the wavy noodles that were soaked in the clear soup base out.

And then, 3 sounds of slurps and food munching could be heard inside the shop.

An abnormally hot and dry wind blew in from the door, and in the sky above, unknown birds let out a 'QUACK—' sound.

A few minutes later, I pushed my finished bowl of noodles to a corner of the table, and then looked at the man opposite me before saying,

"...Then, leader-dono. Any inspiration?"

"..."

Heathcliff, who finished the soup before putting down his bowl, stared at a picture that looked like kanji at the bottom of the bowl,

"...This isn't ramen. Definitely not."

"Un, I feel the same."

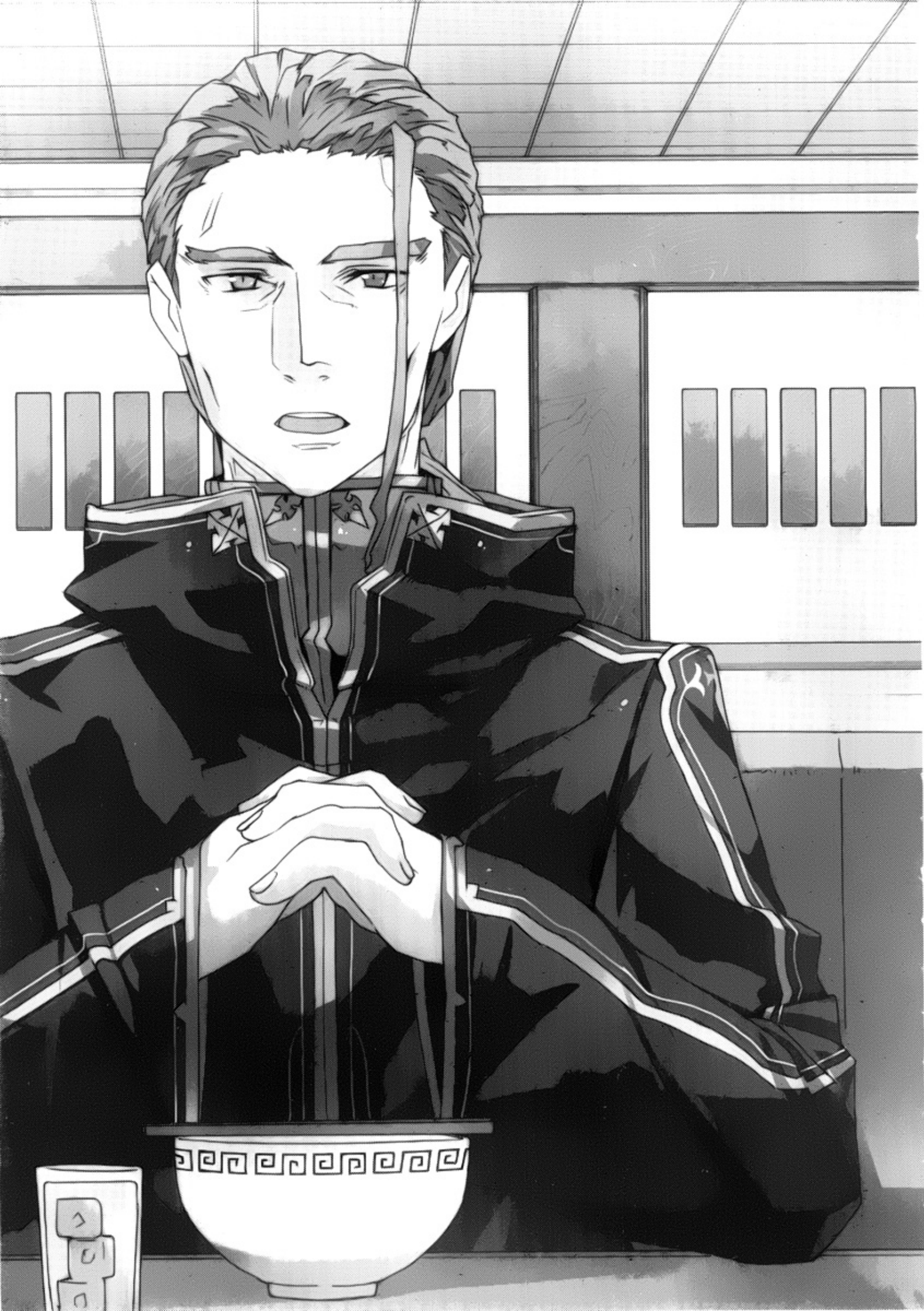
"Then, I'll give you an answer of value equivalent to this bowl of fake ramen."

Tak. He lifted his head and put down the wash-free chopsticks.

"...Through the current information, I can't conclude «exactly what happened». But I can say this — listen up...in this case, the only clues you can consider 'absolutely reliable' are what you saw or heard first-hand."

"...? What does that mean...?"

Heathcliff used those brass-like eyes to stare at Asuna and I who were sitting side by side, and then said,



"It means...what you see and hear in Aincrad are all digital databases that can be converted to processes. There are no such thing as illusions or hallucinations here. On the other hand, all sort of information that aren't data will have some possibility of illusion or lies. If you want to track this killer...«Inner area incident», you can only trust in your own eyes and ears. In other words, your brains have to collect the data directly."

Heathcliff finally said 'thanks for the treat, Kirito-kun', and stood up.

I pondered about what this mysterious swordsman said and got up, telling the shop owner 'we're full', and slipping through the door to leave.

'Why does that kind of shop exist'. Heathcliff, who was in front of me, muttered these words that entered my ears softly.

As the leader-dono seemed to merge into the maze-like streets and disappear, I turned to Asuna, who was standing beside me, and asked her,

"...Do you understand what he just said?"

"...Un."

On seeing her nod, I can't help but get the 'as expected of sub-leader' thought.

"Yeah...anyway, what was just served was 'Tokyo-style ramen without soy sauce', which caused such a half-baked taste."

"Huh?"

"I've decided. One day, I'm going to make soy sauce. Or else I think this insatiable feeling seems like it will never disappear."

"...Is that so. Do your best then..."

I nodded and snarked back with "THAT'S NOT WHAT I'M ASKING HERE!"

"Eh? Kirito-kun? What did you just say?"

"Sorry for bringing you here to eat something so weird. It's my fault, so please hurry up and forget about it. What I was asking just now is, that Heathcliff just said some enlightening-like words. What do they mean?"

"Ahh..."

This time, Asuna definitely nodded and answered me,

"He means, don't believe second-hand information you heard from others completely. In this situation, he's talking about the motive...the «Golden Apple» guild's rare ring incident."

"Ehh~?"

I can't help but moan.

"So you've been suspecting Yolko-san? It's true that those words were completely baseless...but, didn't you just say it just now, Asuna? It's meaningless to doubt what she said without saying what's true and what's not, right?"

In the end, Asuna glanced at me for some reason, and then quickly looked away before nodding a few times.

"We-well, I did say that. But, it's just like the leader said. There are really too few methods to conclude which PK method was used. In that case, why don't we ask someone else who is involved? If we suddenly mention the ring, he might even tense up and reveal some information."

"Eh? Who are you talking about?"

"The one who took that spear away from you, of course."

Part 6

The numbers shown on the bottom right corner of my sight indicated that it was 2pm.

Normally, this is the time lunch ended, and the time where the dungeon clearing and training would go on. However, I didn't have the time to leave the street area. Just moving through the frontline fields and heading into the uncleared dungeon areas would take us until sunset.

For someone like me, who'll slack because «the weather's good», it's fine, but for «The Flash», who was unable to take part in the clearing for 2 straight days, she must be feeling unhappy.

I wondered as I glanced aside to look at Asuna's response. This woman unexpectedly gave off a gentler feeling than usual. She's not only messing with mysterious shops in the dark alleys of Algade, but also looking at the culverts that lead to who knows where — the moment she noticed me. Nn? She gave me such a look and smiled at me.

"What is it?"

She asked, and I hurriedly shook my head and answered,

"N...no, it's nothing."

"You're a weirdo, even though I already knew that."

She started giggling all of a sudden, put her arms on her waist, and then used both heels of her shoes to stamp.

Please, I really don't know who the weirdo is here. Is this the same clearing devil who erupted into a rage and lectured me on sleeping yesterday? Or that she's been grumbling and yet fell for the «Algade-side» style? If that's the case, I'll definitely get her to try the «Algade Roast» that's even more exotic next time.

As I thought about that, I finally heard the buzzing of the transfer gate plaza coming from the side. Luckily, we didn't have to request a roadside NPC to get back to the plaza.

I forcefully stopped that weird excitement in me and gave a dry cough.

"Ahem...then, we're going over to question commander Schmitt. But at this time now, won't the members of the DDA be out hunting?"

Asuna kept her smile and put her fingers on her petite chin before saying, "If Yolko-san's words are true, then Schmitt-san's is one of those «against the sale of the ring»...in other words, he and Kains-san are on the same side. From the way he appeared in front of you yesterday, it was obvious that he himself is already wary of this. Now that he's being targeted by an unknown «Red»...do you think he'll just leave the area in this situation?"

"Ahh...you do make some sense there. But that «Red» player may be using a PK method inside the area. Even if he stays in the streets, he won't be able to guarantee absolute safety."

"It's because of this that he wants to exert the maximum effort in ensuring his own safety. If he's not hiding at the inn, he's..."

On hearing till this point, I finally understood what Asuna was trying to get at. I flicked my finger and continued,

"He'll use the «Guarding city» method and hide inside the headquarters of the DDA."

One of the strongest guilds, the Divine Dragons Alliance, built its grand guild headquarters on the 56th floor, which was actually not too long ago. Of course, it's definitely not a coincidence that they set their headquarters on a higher floor than the Knights of the Blood who built theirs on the 55th floor, but I saw that it was more of an exaggerated building like a «castle» or a «fort» rather than a «home», and couldn't help but feel disgusted by such daringness. Klein, Agil and I once cleared a table full of dishes to give them some respect, but too many taste signals entered us, and our stomachs felt swollen for 3 whole days.

I, who walked out from Algade's transfer gate, looked at the horrifying museum of filling food on the hill that overlooked the whole stretches of streets, and couldn't help but burp. Asuna didn't seem to react much as she immediately walked down that red bricked path along the slope.

I looked at the silver-based blue dragon guild flag that flapped above, and deliberately kept my volume down before saying,

"Speaking of which, even if DDA-sama is a famous guild, it's really amazing that they can get so much funds to buy such a building. I don't know how you feel about this, KoB sub-leader-dono."

"Okay, I guess. If we look at the number of people in the guild, the members of DDA outnumber us 2 to 1. But about the funding, it is really a little weird. Our head of finances Daizen-san once said that 'they should have some highly efficient Farming Spots'."

"Is that so?"

The so called farming is an MMO-term for hunting large mobs at high speeds. Last year, I decided to take a high-risk activity because of a certain incident and used the «Ant Hill» on the 46th floor. It was a symbolic place. However, once the experience gain there at a certain time exceeded a certain limit, the «Cardinal System» that ruled the world of SAO would naturally decrease the efficiency.

Thus, the people amongst the clearing group had a gentlemanly agreement that 'we're to reveal all good farming areas to all places, and everyone is to collect the rich resources until they run out'. However, DDA may have gone against this agreement and hid such places — that's basically what Asuna meant.

This is really sneaky, but DDA getting stronger basically meant that the entire clearing group would become stronger, so no one could tell them off for it.

If we did that, what will face us in the end would be self-hypocrisy in the clearing group. We set up a flag in the death game to release everyone, and brazenly took up most of the resources the system provided. However, this may be just to fulfill our own desire to be at the top of the pyramid.

On thinking about this, I suddenly felt that the «Aincrad Liberation Force», which had a completely different objective from the clearing group — forcing all players to share all resources equally didn't seem to be much of a daydream. That's right. If the «Army» actually insisted on this, there wouldn't be this «inside area incident», and the ring drop from the monster that was the cause of the murder would be forcefully taken and sold, and all profits will be divided to every player.

"Really...the guy who created this death game is really too cruel..."

Why choose an «MMO»? There are so many RTS or FPS that are fairer and could easily decide the winner instantly.

SAO has been testing the greed of the high-leveled players. It forced the players to balance their puny sense of superiority against their friends —— or that could be said to be every single player.

And the criminal behind this ring incident got swallowed by his own greed.

Actually, I myself faced such a stern trial. That is because, in my Properties Window, there was a huge secret that even a rare magic item couldn't compare to, and I chose to keep it.

——Perhaps Asuna may have heard me muttering as she seemed to completely understand what was going on in my mind and muttered,

"That's why we have to solve this case."

Asuna forcefully grabbed my right hand, showing a strong smile that swept away any doubts. While I panicked, she told me to wait here, and then moved towards the large castle gate in front of us with heavy steps. I put my hand that still had some warmth on it into my coat pocket, and leant on a nearby tree.

Basically, only guild members there could enter this building that was registered as their guild headquarters. In other words, this is no different from a player's private house, so there was no need for guards. However, a guild which had ample manpower would still send people to stand in front, and their main aim wasn't to keep watch, but to pass messages from visitors.

And the Divine Dragons Alliance was the same. The splendid gate had two heavily-armed spearmen standing there like guards.

——They were more like mid-level bosses in an RPG rather than guards. On thinking about this, my heart started to be wary, but Asuna walked towards the guy on the right without hesitation and greeted him.

"Hello. I'm Asuna of the Knights of the Blood..."

The burly warrior immediately straightened his upper body and softly whispered,

"Ah, hello! It's been tough on you! Is there any reason why you specially made your way here?"

He didn't look like a guard or a mid-level boss. Asuna openly gave a cute smile to the giant who came running from the left side, and then stated her aim for this visit,

"I came here to talk to your guild member about something. Can you please help me contact Schmitt-san?"

Both men look at each other, and one of them tilted his head and said,

"That guy should be in the dungeon area at the frontlines, right?"

But the other answered,

"Ah, but he seemed to have said during breakfast that he's going to rest for the today because he has a headache. Maybe he is in his room. I'll try asking."

The way they established rapport with each other really shocked me. In terms of guild relation, the DDA and KoB definitely couldn't be considered to be on good relations with each other, but it might be different for interpersonal relationships — of course, it might be because of Asuna's charm added to it. If it's the power of the latter working, I might as well stand here and not come out.

As I leaned my body near the tree branch clinging on the castle wall to try and hide further, another guard started to quickly type a message and sent it out.

And then, there was a reply in less than 30 seconds as the fingers of the guard again returned to the window. It seemed that Schmitt was really hiding inside the castle. If he was fighting in the dungeons on the frontlines, it was impossible for him to reply so quickly.

The guard looked at the message, and immediately frowned in a troubled manner.

"He is resting today...but, he wants me to ask you what this is about..."

Asuna pondered about this for a while, and simply answered,

"Just tell him 'I want to talk about the ring'."

The other party immediately answered.

The guy who should be lying on the bed because of a headache immediately rushed down to the castle gate and said 'let's go somewhere

else' to talk and immediately walked briskly down the hill. Asuna, who followed Schmitt, passed me, and I pretended that nothing had happened as I walked out from the shades of the tree. Schmitt glanced at me, but he may have known that Asuna and I were investigating this, and didn't react at all as he merely walked faster.

Schmitt, who's walking quickly several meters in front of me, was still wearing the high-ranked armor that he wore when he snatched the short spear away from me, and there was even a thin layer of chainmail beneath it. He was not carrying that large long spear, but the weight of this equipment should be quite a lot. He just looked like he couldn't feel the burden as he continued to move forward at a fast speed. He was no longer just a mere tank, and was more like an American Football player.

This athlete-sized burly guy that was rare to find in SAO walked down the slope and entered the street area before finally stopping. He swayed the armor on his body and turned around, and immediately asked me instead of Asuna,

"Who told you about this?"

"Huh?"

I answered, and then immediately realized that he had left out the taboo term 'ring incident', and cautiously answered,

"...I heard it from an ex-member of the «Golden Apple»."

The moment I said this, the thick eyebrows below the upright short hair twitched.

"Who?"

At this moment, I hesitated for a moment. If Schmitt was the perpetrator yesterday, he should have known that Kains and Yolko were together. There was no point in hiding Yolko's name now.

"Yolko-san."

The moment I said that, the hulking man immediately looked like he had lost his soul as he looked up, and then gave a long sigh. Fuu...

I remained emotionless as my mind was thinking quickly. If his reaction now was 'relaxed' like I thought, that must be because he knew that Yolko and he were both 'against selling the ring'.

What happened yesterday may have involved the 'selling group', including Grimlock, taking revenge on the 'opposing group', and Schmitt obviously had known about it. That was why he had declared that he wasn't going to hunt, but hide inside the safety of his guild headquarters.

At this time, it's unlikely that Schmitt was Kains' murderer, but he obviously had a motive. For example, the culprits in the ring incident may be Kains and Schmitt, and Schmitt decided to kill him to prevent word from being leaked. I wondered as I raised my question,

"Schmitt-san, do you know where Grimlock, the one who made that short spear, is?"

"NO...NO IDEA!"

Schmitt shouted loudly as he shook his head vehemently.

"Ever since the guild disbanded, we never contacted each other. I don't even know if he's alive!"

He said quickly as his sights continued to move and looked at the streets. It was as if he was afraid that a short spear would suddenly fly in from somewhere.

At this moment, Asuna, who had been keeping quiet up till now, suddenly said in a steady voice,

"Schmitt-san. We're not looking for the culprit who killed the Golden Apple guild leader, but the one who started the incident yesterday...more correctly, we're looking for what method the criminal used to kill. This is to protect the peace inside the «Area» just like now."

She paused for a short while, and then continued with a sterner tone,

"...Unfortunately, the most suspicious person is the one who created that spear...and the spouse of the guild leader, Grimlock-san. Of course, someone may have deliberately made it seem that way, so we have to talk to Grimlock-san to get this clear. If you know his whereabouts or how to contact him, can you please tell us?"

Schmitt, who was being stared at with the light brown eyes, backed his upper body. It looked like he was not used to talking to female players, and of course, I'm the same.

He looked away and closed his mouth. If even Asuna's direct assault didn't work, he really is a tough enemy. I thought as I wanted to swallow my sigh, but soon,

"...I really don't know where he is. But..."

Schmitt stammered and said,

"Grimlock really likes an NPC restaurant and would always be there. Maybe he..."

"Re, really!?"

I leant my body forward and thought.

In Aincrad, eating can be said to be the only luxury. But at the same time, it's hard to find a flavor filled one from those cheap NPC restaurants. Since he liked it to such an extent of going over every day, it was hard for him not to go there in the long run. That's because I had my 3 meals from 3 different restaurants in a rotational manner. On a side note, those three doesn't include that enigmatic restaurant we went to just now.

"Then, please tell me the shop's name..."

"I have a condition."

Schmitt interrupted me.

"I can tell you, but I have a condition...let me meet Yolko."

Asuna and I let Schmitt stop at a nearby equipment store, and then started to discuss the condition.

"There...shouldn't be any problems, right? What do you think?"

"Un, well..."

Asuna asked, but I couldn't immediately answer and could only ponder out loud.

If Schmitt — or Yolko, who almost definitely couldn't be the killer in the inside circle incident yesterday, were to meet, they might treat each other as someone to kill. Once they meet, one side might use an «Inside area PK skill» to cause a new victim, and I couldn't ignore this possibility.

However, for that to happen, that party would have to equip a weapon and use a sword skill. Such a motion would require opening a window to set up equipment and pressing the OK button. No matter how fast it is, it'll take about 4, 5 seconds.

"...With us standing around to watch, there probably won't be any chance to PK. However —— if it's not to PK, why did that Schmitt request to meet Yolko-san today?"

I move my arms aside, and Asuna seemed to be rather bothered.

"Who knows...don't tell me...he's been secretly admiring her...un, probably not."

"Eh, really!?"

I couldn't help but look back at that stiff-looking Schmitt, but Asuna immediately pulled my collar to prevent me from doing so.

"I said it's not! Anyway...if there's no danger, we just have to see if Yolko-san's willing. I'll send a message to her to confirm."

"O, okay then. I'll leave it to you."

Asuna opened her window and immediately hit the all-view keyboard at a blazing speed. This 'friend message' was a convenient function to contact a player far away, but it's pointless if one only knew the other party's name, since the person had to log the other party as a friend or a fellow guild member or a marriage partner. That's why we couldn't use it to contact Grimlock. We can send an 'instant message' once we know the name, but both sides had to be on the same level, and we couldn't tell if the other party received the message or not.

Yolko seemed to answer instantly, and Asuna glanced at the window that was not closed before nodding and saying,

"She said she's okay with it. Then...it's a little uneasy, but we better bring the person over. The location will be the inn where Yolko-san is in."

"Un. It's too risky to let her come outside."

I agreed, and finally manage to turn to look at Schmitt, who was inside the equipment shop. Once he saw me make an OK sign, the heavily equipped hulking figure's face showed an obvious relieved expression.

The three of us moved from the 56th floor to the main street of the 57th floor, Marten. Once we walked out from the blue transfer gate, the streets had already been dyed by sunset.

There were many NPC and merchant players in the plaza with stores and lined up with each other, and there were loud noises of selling coming at us. Between the shops, there were many swordsmen who were here to rest after a day's worth of hard work. However, they all obviously avoided a spot in the plaza, making the place look very empty.

That place was the land facing the church. Of course, about 24 hours ago, the guy called Kains mysteriously died here. I forced myself to look forward instead of looking over there, and started to move down the path I walked yesterday.

A few minutes later, we arrived at the inn and headed up to the second level. After a long walk down the corridor into the deepest place, we arrived at Yolko's room — or rather, a room in which she could hide inside.

I knocked the door and said "This is Kirito."

There was an immediate response from inside the room, and I turned the handle on the door. The lock that was set so that 'only friends can open' let out a slight sound before opening.

After opening the door, I looked in to see the thing right in front of the door, a set of matching sofas placed in the middle of the room, and Yolko sitting on one of them. She quickly stood up, swayed her deep blue hair and bowed slightly.

I stood at the door, completely unmoving, looked at Yolko, and then at Schmitt's face that was right behind me before saying,

"Well...first, for safety reasons, I'm going to make this clear to everyone. Both sides are not allowed to equip weapons nor open windows. I hope you can abide by this. I know this may be unpleasant, but please follow these ground rules."

"...Okay."

"I understand."

Yolko said in a barely audible voice, and Schmitt answered in an anxious voice. I slowly entered the room and lead Schmitt and Asuna in.

These two ex-«Golden Apple» guild members who may not have met for a long time were only looking at each other silently.

Yolko and Schmitt used to be comrades of the same guild, but right now, there must be a difference of about 20 levels between them. Of course, the higher leveled member was definitely Schmitt, who belonged to the clearing guild. However, from what I could see, this strong spear user was a lot more tense than Yolko.

In fact, the one who spoke up first was also Yolko.

"...It's been a while, Schmitt."

She then smiled. Schmitt bit his lips hard first, and then answered in a hoarse voice,

"...Un. I thought we wouldn't meet again. Can I sit down?"

Yolko nodded, and this fully-armored hulking figure walked over to the other sofa while his armor is clanked noisily. I think this shouldn't be comfortable to sit in, but he had no intention of taking off his armor.

I closed the room and checked that it was locked before standing on the eastern side of where both of them sat, and Asuna stood opposite me.

We booked the most luxurious room in the inn for Yolko, who we had expect to stay in for a few days, so even with four people crowding the room, it was still rather wide. The door is at the northern side of the wall, and the west had another door leading to the bedroom. Also, the east and south side each had a window.

The window on the south side was completely open, and the breeze that carried the spring sunset blowed in freely through the window. Of course, the window was protected by the system, and even when someone opened it, nobody could enter. As this place is a lot taller than the surrounding buildings, one could see the scene of a deep purple street through the gaps of the white curtain.

The noise of the street that came in with the wind overwhelmed Yolko's slightly soft voice.

"Schmitt, I hear that you're currently a member of the Divine Dragons Alliance? That's really amazing. The Divine Dragons Alliance is considered an elite guild amongst the clearing group, right?"

I felt that this was a sincere praise, but Schmitt's wrinkles near his eyebrows became deeper. He said in a deep tone,

"What do you mean by that? Isn't that too unnatural?"

This abnormally direct answer caused me to frown, but Yolko didn't seem to be affected at all.

"How can that be? I just feel that after the guild disbanded, you must have tried hard to level up. Kains and I gave up after having difficulty leveling, so you're really amazing compared to us."

Yolko shook aside the deep blue hair that dangled on her shoulders and smiled again.

She's not as ridiculously fully equipped like Schmitt in full armor, but Yolko was wearing quite a bit too. Her thick dress had a leather vest, and she was wearing a purple velvet tunic. Her shoulders even had a shawl on, and though they couldn't be compared to metallic armor, with so much clothing on, that should at least increase quite a lot of defense. She looked rather calm right now, but deep inside, she must be feeling anxious.

At this point, Schmitt couldn't hide his nervousness as he leaned forward in his armor and said,

"JUST FORGET ABOUT WHAT'S GOING ON WITH ME! MORE THAN THAT...I want to ask about Kains."

He suddenly hushed his voice and continued,

"Why is Kains still killed at this point? Did that guy...take the ring? Is that guy the one who killed GA's leader?"

I immediately understood that GA referred to Golden Apple, the simplified term of calling the «Golden Apple» guild. However, these words basically meant that he had nothing to do with the ring incident and the inside area murder. If this was an act, he could really be an actor.

On hearing his muttering, Yolko's expression finally showed some change for once. She kept her smile and faced Schmitt head on before saying,

"Impossible. Kains and I really respected the leader from the bottom of our heart. The reason we were against selling the ring was because it would be more pragmatic if we used it to increase the guild's battle strength

instead of selling it in col. I think she would have the same thoughts as us now."

"Tha...that's what I thought too. Don't forget that I was against selling the ring. Besides...it's not that those against it had a motive to steal it. Those who agreed to sell it...those guys who wanted the col, someone amongst them may have wanted to gain all the profits from the sale!"

He used his right hand that was protected by the metal gauntlet to slap his own knee, and then cupped his head before saying,

"But...why did Grimlock still want to take action on Kains now...does he want to kill off the three of us who were opposed to selling the ring? Will you and I become his victims?"

—This doesn't look like an act at all. To me, Schmitt's agitated side profile showed real fear.

In comparison to Schmitt, who was scared stiff, Yolko regained her composure and said something to him.

"We still can't confirm that Grimlock killed Kains. Maybe another member requested him to make the short spear...or maybe..."

She turned her empty stare to the short table in front of the sofa and muttered,

"Maybe the leader is taking revenge on her own. Ordinary players can't possibly kill inside the area."

"Wha..."

The muscular man opened his mouth and panted. Even I was starting to feel a little scared when she said this.

Schmitt stared blankly at the smiling Yolko and said,

"But didn't you just say that Kains didn't take the ring away..."

Yolko didn't answer immediately as she just stood up and took a step to the right.

"I couldn't sleep at all last night. I could only think. Speaking of which, even though the one who killed the guild leader is someone in the guild, but it could be all of us. When that ring drop appeared, there wasn't any need to vote. We could have just followed the guild leader's instructions. No, we

should have just let her equip that ring. The leader was the strongest swordsman amongst us, and she was the one who could use the ring to the maximum ability. However, we couldn't give up on our selfish desire, and no one raised such a suggestion. Everyone has been saying that we will one day let GA become part of the clearing group, but no one was thinking about the guild. Everyone was only hoping to make themselves stronger."

After saying so many words, Yolko's waist touched the frame of the south window.

She prepared to sit on it and continued,

"Only one person, only Grimlock-san said to leave it to the leader. That person gave up on his selfish desire and thought about the development of the guild. That's why that person became like this, and took revenge on us who can't give up on our desires, and he has the right to take revenge for the guild leader..."

The silence suddenly engulfed the room, and an icy night wind swayed through the air inside the room.

Kachan kachan kachan, the weak sounds of metal ringing could soon be heard. The source is the armor from the slightly trembling Schmitt. This battle-hardened elite player looked down with a pale face and muttered in a trance-like state,

"...Don't kid around. Stop kidding around. Right now...it's been half a year...why now..."

GABAK! He straightened his upper body and suddenly shouts,

"CAN YOU ACCEPT THAT, YOLKO! YOU'VE BEEN WORKING HARD TILL NOW! HOW CAN YOU JUST GET YOURSELF KILLED BY SUCH AN UNKNOWN METHOD!"

Schmitt, Asuna and I were all staring at Yolko at the window.

This female player, with an illusionary presence around her, let her stare roam through the air, seemingly thinking of how to answer Schmitt's question.

Soon after, her lips opened slightly, seemingly about to say something——

At this moment.

TONN! A deep sound suddenly echoed through the room. At the same time, Yolko widened her eyes and opened her mouth wide.

That slender body started to sway tremendously. She first took a forceful step forward, and then staggered and spun before putting her hand on the open window.

At this moment, a strong gust of wind blew, and the long hair behind Yolko swayed with it.

I saw an unbelievable thing.

A small black rod-shaped item poked out from the short, glossy, purple tunic.

As it was too small, I couldn't tell at the moment what that was. But when I saw that the rod-shaped object was flashing red, I immediately had a bad feeling about this.

"Ah...!"

Asuna let out an almost screaming gasp, and I instinctively rushed over immediately.

I reached my hand out and got ready to pull Yolko's body over. But...

My fingers merely grazed the shawl, and Yolko's body fell outside the inn silently.

"Yolko-SAN!"

Just as I shouted out and poked my body out of the window...

Yolko's body fell down onto the stone just like that, and after a bounce, was surrounded by a blue light effect.

BASHA! The sound of slight breaking could be heard immediately. The polygons shrapnel expanded out with the exploding blue light——

A second later, an item could be heard landing clearly, leaving only a black dagger on the road.

Part 7

How is this possible!

At this moment, my mind suddenly shouted silently, and there were a lot of reasons for this.

First, the guest room of the inn should be protected by the system. Even if the window was open, there was absolutely no way for someone to enter or throw it in successfully.

Also, it was really hard to believe that the small throwing dagger could create a Continuous Pierce damage which could wear out a medium-level player's HP. It's impossible for 5 seconds to have passed from the moment the dagger hit Yolko to the time it disappeared.

This couldn't be possibly happening. This killer's method can't be considered an «Inside area PK». This was already a horrifying instant death attack.

I held my breath and felt the absolutely chilling feeling on my back and forced myself to look away from the stone floor where Yolko had disappeared. I then looked up and widened my eyes like a camera lens to look at the street scene opposite.

Finally, I saw it.

About 2 blocks away from the inn, there was a roof of a building that was about as tall as this place.

A black figure stood over there with the deep purple sunset as a background——

The person was covered in a pitch black hooded robe, so it was impossible to see the face. I squeezed out the term 'death god' from my mind before shouting out,

"THAT BASTARD...!!"

I let my right leg step on the window sill and shouted back without looking,

"Asuna, I'll leave the rest to you!"

I then jumped towards the building that was separated from this place by the street.

But even with a revised level in agility, it's still reckless to jump over 5m without running. I can't use a landing, and only managed to barely use an extended right hand at the last second to grab onto the side of the roof. I then used my revised level in strength to pull up, spin in the air and land on the roof. At this moment, Asuna's anxious voice immediately came from behind.

"YOU CAN'T. KIRITO-KUN!"

I understand clearly why she wanted to stop me. If I get hit by that flying dagger, there's a chance that I'll die immediately.

However, I really can't let the criminal who finally appeared go just for the sake of my own safety.

I was the one who had said to protect Yolko's safety. However, I just thought in a very narrow manner that it'll be alright if we hid inside the inn, and never thought of what might possibly happen. If the system could offer protection, then the street — the «inside area» should be considered a safe place. Since the enemy can PK inside the area, it's naturally possible to let the protection in the inn fail. Why didn't I think about this?

Standing on the roof far away, the black robed guy has the wind blowing hard at him, looking like he's mocking this me who's feeling remorse.

"HOLD IT RIGHT...!"

I shouted and started to run forward again before drawing the sword from my back. I can't deal any damage with my sword on the streets, but at least I can deflect the dagger he throws over.

I deliberately made sure my dashing speed didn't slow down as I continued to jump from this roof to the next one. The players walking down below might think that I'm a madman showing off my agility in a performance, but I don't have time to care about such things as I dragged the hem of my coat and continued to jump and rip through the darkness.

The assassin in the hooded robe doesn't seem like he intends to escape or attack as he just watches me close in. As both of us are just separated by 2 buildings, the assassin suddenly puts in right hand into the clutches of the robe. I immediately hold my breath and move the sword in front of me.

However...

He raises his hand out, and what he takes out isn't a throwing dagger. Under the color of the twilight, a familiar looking sapphire blue suddenly appears in front of my eyes. It's the teleport crystal——

"Damn it!"

I cursed and use my left hand to draw out three throwing picks with my left hand while dashing forward before throwing them all out at one go. Of course, I am not intending to hurt him, but hoped to use the instinctive dodging moment to slow down his chanting of the command.

What's vexing was that the enemy was abnormally calm. That person didn't seem to be in fear as he took the three throwing picks flying over at him with silver light effects before casually raising the teleport crystal.

The three throwing picks were all blocked by the purple system wall in front of the hooded robe and immediately dropped onto the roof. I thought at least I had to hear the enemy's voice as I pricked my ears. If I knew his destination, I could use the crystal to catch up.

But this plan failed as at the most critical moment, a loud sounding bell could be heard throughout the streets of Marten.

My ears —— or more accurately, the hearing field was largely occupied by the high decibel chime that indicated that it was 5 o'clock, so I couldn't hear the murderer say the command with the lowest possible volume. The blue teleport light appeared, and the pitch black hooded robe's profile vanished in front of me, who had already moved just one street away from him.

"...Ugh!"

I couldn't shout out anything at all, and I raised the sword in my right hand, continuing to move to the place that guy was standing at. The purple light scattered, and in the middle of my sights, all I could see were the words of the system, «Immortal Object».



I left the roof and switched roads to return to the inn, stopped at where Yolko disappeared on the road, and looked at the pitch black throwing dagger.

Just a few minutes ago, a female player died here. I couldn't believe this no matter what. To me, a player's death was an outcome where the player tried all sorts of hard work and all sorts of dodging counters, only for them to be not enough. Something such as a killing method that was impossible to dodge at that moment shouldn't possibly exist.

I bent down to pick up that dagger. It was small, but basically made of the same kind of metal, and felt quite heavy. The shaver-like thing blade had shark teeth-like reverse spikes on it. That's right, this is a weapon created with the same kind of ideal as the short spear that had killed Kains.

If I stabbed this thing into my body now, would my HP drop drastically? I'm really driven by this urge to experiment, but I closed my eyes tight to remove this impulse from my mind and entered the inn.

I walked up to the second level, knocked on the door and said my name. KACHINK, the system's lock rang emptily as the door opened.

Asuna had already drawn her rapier. Once she saw that it was me, she gave a complicated agitated yet relieved look as she kept her volume down to the minimum to shout at me,

"IDIOT! DON'T BE SO RECKLESS!"

Fuu. She sighed out long and kept her volume down further before continuing.

"...Then...what about that?"

I slightly shook my head.

"I couldn't catch him. He used teleport to get away. I couldn't even tell whether it was a guy or a girl whether it's from face or voice. Well...if it's Grimlock, I guess it's a guy..."

It's impossible for people of the same gender to get married in SAO. If the leader of Golden Apple was a female, Grimlock, who's married to her, would naturally be a guy. And if this is something I had to think hard about, it's really useless. In fact, about 80 percent of SAO players are male.

As for these words that weren't very meaningful in the first place——

Cringing his large body on the sofa as tightly as possible, Schmitt inadvertently made a response as he let out a metallic sound. Kachank kachank.

"...That's not right."

"Not right...what's not right?"

Schmitt didn't look at Asuna, but lowered his head even further and groaned,

"It's not him. That person...the black robe standing on the roof isn't Grimlock. Grim is a lot taller, and...and..."

Asuna and I held our breaths in anticipation of the words he was about to say next.

"That hooded robe is something that belongs to the leader of the GA. She would normally dress up in such a concealing manner whenever she walks down the streets. That's right...she was wearing that when she went to sell the ring! That person...that person just now was her. She came to take revenge on all the members here. That's the leader's ghost."

Haha, hahaha. Suddenly, a laugh caused me to look away from the dagger.

"If it's a ghost, everything is possible then, and PK inside the area will be a piece of cake. We might as well get the leader to beat the last boss in SAO. If there's no HP right at the beginning, it's impossible for her to die anyway.

Haha, hahaha. Schmitt continued to let out such a hysterical laugh. I threw the black dagger in my hand onto the table in front of him.

GONK! A deep sound rang out, seemingly snapping the switch in Schmitt as the laughter stopped. He stared at this jagged blade that was giving off a vicious presence for a few seconds——

"Hii..."

The muscular guy flung his upper body back, and I kept my volume down and said,

"It's not a ghost. This dagger really exists. It's just a program code written into the SAO server. It's the same as the short spear you put inside the

storage. If you don't believe it, you can take this dagger and check on it however you want."

"No, no thanks! You can have the spear back, too!"

Schmitt shouted, opened his menu window, mispressed with his trembling fingers a few times before finally materializing the black short spear. The weapon that appeared in the window seemed like it was tossed aside as it landed beside the dagger.

The giant cuddled his head again, and Asuna said to him in a gentle voice,

"...Schmitt-san, I also feel that it wasn't a ghost. That's because if Aincrad has ghosts, it won't be just the ghost of the Golden Apple leader. The 3,500 people who died up till now will all be unhappy. Am I right?"

That's the case, and I feel this way, too. Even if it's me, I had the confidence that if I died here, I'd feel really unhappy and materialize as a ghost. I believe that only the leader of the KoB would be the kind of person who'd accept this fate and become a Buddha.

However, Schmitt continued to keep his head down as he swayed.

"You...don't know her. That person...Griselda is extremely fierce and always determined...however, she's also extremely strict to injustice and craftiness. She might be a lot fiercer than you, Asuna-san. That's why, if someone set a trap and killed her...Griselda would definitely not forgive them, even if she had to become a ghost to deal judgment to that person..."

Outside this locked window, which Asuna probably locked, the sun was about to set. The street lights that were lit at several points should be the places where the players found lodging and caused the streets to buzz. But unbelievably, the noise seemed to avoid this room.

I took a deep breath and broke the silence that covered the entire room.

"...If you believe that's the case, fine, but I definitely won't. These two 'inside area murder incidents' definitely have some form of system logic. I'll definitely find it and prove it to you...and you're to follow our agreement and help us."

"Hel...help?"

"Didn't you say that you are going to tell us the shop Grimlock often went to? Right now, this is the only clue we have. If we watch him for several days, we'll definitely find him."

To be honest, even if we found that Grimlock who had created that black short spear and probably the dagger beside it, I had no idea what to do next. We're not the 'army', and we couldn't possibly lock him up.

However, those words Yolko said before she was killed — 'that person took revenge on us who can't give up on our desires, and he has the right to take revenge for the guild leader'. If it's just like what Yolko said, Grimlock may have wanted to take revenge on everyone who was against selling the ring, or probably even wanted to take revenge on all the members. And the motive would be the strong feelings of a husband to the deceased leader.

Then, if we could meet and talk seriously, there might be a change. Right now, we could only bet on such a possibility.

On hearing my words, Schmitt lowered his head, but soon got up heavily from the chair. He walked to the writing table beside the wall, took the parchment and the feather pen that was already prepared before writing the name and location of the shop.

I looked at the back profile and suddenly thought of something. I then asked,

"Ah, also, please write down the names of all the members in the original Golden Apple guild. I'll go over to the «Monument of Life» to check the survivors later."

The giant nodded silently again and continued writing for a few seconds.

Soon after that, he took up the written piece of parchment with one hand and handed it to me, saying,

"...It's embarrassing as a player of a clearing group, but...I don't have the mood to go out for now. Please remove me from the boss conquest parties, too, and..."

The will that was once in him has completely disappeared as what was left was a blank expression. The spear user who was a part of the Divine Dragons Alliance leadership said softly,

"...Next, please send me back to the DDA headquarters."

Neither Asuna nor I could mock Schmitt for such a cowardly action.

We have the terrified giant in the middle as we moved from the inn on the 57th level, through the transfer gate, and down to the main headquarters on the 56th level. Asuna and I never stopped looking around at the dark corners. If there was someone with a hood or robe that was unrelated to this appearing out of a sudden at this point, both of us might have subconsciously rushed over.

Even after going through the gates of the headquarters, Schmitt never showed a relieved look. I saw his back profile scamper into the building and sighed.

I exchanged looks with Asuna who was beside me for a while,

"...I'm really regretting...what happened to Yolko-san..."

Asuna whispered these words as she bit her lips. I answered back with a hoarse voice 'yeah'.

In truth, Yolko's death brought me several times more shock than Kains's. My mind continued to recall her falling down the window, and I continued,

"To be honest, up till now, it was like we were sailing on a boat...but we can't do that now. Even if it's for her sake, we have to solve this case —— I'm going near that restaurant to ambush. What about you, Asuna?"

On hearing my question, Asuna immediately lifted her head and answered clearly,

"Of course I'm going, too. Let's investigate the truth."

"...Is that so? Then, please guide me through."

To be honest, I really hesitated on whether I should continue to let Asuna accompany me. If we continued to get involved in this case, it wouldn't be surprising if we were targeted by Grimlock and became his next targets.

But Asuna quickly turned around to seemingly interrupt my hesitation and headed to the transfer gate. I took a deep breath of the cold night air and exhaled it out before following the chestnut-colored hair.

Part 8

The shop recorded on Schmitt's memo was a small bar located in the lower region of the main streets of the 20th floor. This shop that's hidden on the sidepath didn't give the look that there would be dishes 'that one can eat without getting sick of'.

However, the fact is that there would be lots of delicious meals in these kind of shops, and I finally managed to control my impulse to rush into the shop and order all the dishes inside. If Grimlock was that assassin in the hooded robe, he should have seen my face. If he discovered me first, he might not be coming to this shop.

Asuna and I hid in a cover nearby and watched the surroundings, and we found that there was an inn we could look into the bar in question. We immediately rushed through the gaps in the crowd, into the inn opposite the street, and rented a room on the second level.

As expected, we could clearly see what went on at the bar entrance. We kept the lights off, moved two chairs over to the window and sat next to each other to start watching.

But soon after, Asuna 'hey' frowned and called me.

"...It's good that we're serious here, but we have no idea what Grimlock looks like."

"Ahh, that's why I wanted to get Schmitt to come along right at the beginning, but it couldn't be helped when we see him like this...however, I managed to see the player under the hood who looks like Grimlock from close range. If we find a guy who's tall and muscular, we can use a duel request to invite him in, even though that might be reckless."

"Eh?"

On hearing this, Asuna widened her eyes and increased her volume.

In SAO, as long as our stares were focused on other players, there would be a green or orange information indicator—«Color Cursor». But for the players we meet for the first time, we'd only see the HP bar; the name and levels couldn't be seen.

Of course, these are all sorts of anti-crime prevention measures. For example, if someone knows of that player's name, that player may get harassing messages from people misusing the Instant Message function. If

it's easy for the level to be discovered by others, the lower-level players would be treated as prey on the streets and stalked, and it would be very easy for people to be robbed or harassed or all sorts of things in weird areas.

However, it's because we couldn't see other people's names that trying to track people became a little more troublesome. If I wanted to know the name of a player I'm meeting for the first time, there was only one way, a 1vs1 duel. In other words, a duel request.

If I pressed the duel button on the menu window, used the color-cursor in choosing mode to designate the target, and my sights immediately showed a «You've requested a 1vs1 duel with someone». If I looked at it again, I'll know the proper English name of the enemy.

However, the other party's sights would immediately see that I sent a duel request from here. Thus, it's impossible for me to not reveal my name as I investigated the name of the other player, and such an act is completely rude in the first place. In that case, it's very likely that the enemy would draw his weapon to take this challenge. On hearing my words, Asuna opened her mouth, looking like she was about to say something—probably something that meant 'it's dangerous' or something.

However, Asuna quickly closes her mouth and nods seriously. She probably understands that there's no other way, and what she says next is—

"...But if you're going to talk with Grimlock-san, I'm coming along, too."

On hearing her say this, I could only force myself to swallow my words to make her stay inside this room.

I could only nod my head hesitatingly and check the time. It's 6.40pm, about the time for players to return to the street areas to have dinner as things get bustling. The bar in question looked rather normal, but the Swing-Door continued to shake freely. However, I never saw a player that was tall and muscular and looked like the hooded robe I saw.

We can only bet on this shop that has become the last clue, but there was some concern we still couldn't ignore. In the inn on the 57th floor, Schmitt muttered before that 'the black robe standing on the roof isn't Grimlock. Grim is a lot taller'—even though I doubt that this might be a mistake in judgment on Schmitt's part due to fear, but if this is the fact, such surveillance is pointless and we wouldn't be able to find him.

I'll be looking at the swing-door of this bar that has a hidden famed restaurant's atmosphere for the entire night without being able to eat...

On thinking about this, I couldn't help but press against my stomach.

Immediately after, something reached out in front of my eyes. It's something wrapped in white paper and giving off a thick aroma. I couldn't help but look at this thing, and Asuna continued to stare in the direction of the bar as she simply said, 'for you'. I instinctively asked to check.

"...For, for me?"

"Who else do you think I can give it to in this situation? Do you think I'm boasting?"

"No, it's not that. I'm wrong. I'll take it then."

I pull my neck back and quickly received the paper bag. I glanced over at Asuna and found that she continued her surveillance, skilfully materializing another similar looking item.

I happily unwrapped the paper, and found a large sand baguette inside. I stared blankly at the inside of the bread that's suitably baked and was stuffed with vegetables and roasted meat, and Asuna said with a calm voice,

"The durability value is going to run out. It'll disappear soon, so it's best that you hurry up and eat it."

"Eh, ah, okay, itadakimasu!"

I hear that it's going to vanish soon, which meant that there won't be much time to space out. The durability value of a food item is normally very low unless special ingredients are used. I have experienced having the bentos I was going to try disappear from my hands. The only method was to put it into an «Eternal Preserving Trinket» that only a master-class craftsman could make, and the food that's put inside would never disappear even when carried to the field. However, the sad thing is that this small box can only be packed with two nuts.

Thus, I quickly opened my mouth at the fastest speed possible and took a bite off the sand baguette and enjoyed that chewing feeling for the time being. The taste was simple, though a little stimulating, making me want to continue biting. The durability of the food did not affect the flavour. As long as the food existed, the taste would never change at all.

I stared at the entrance of the bar and quickly finished off this large sand baguette before letting out a sigh of satisfaction. I looked at Asuna, who was elegantly chewing beside me, and indicated my thanks before asking,

"Thanks for that. Speaking of which, when did you buy a bento? We went by the roadside stalls just now, but there was nothing so good being sold, you know?"

"Didn't I say that the durability was about to finish? It's because I thought about this that I already prepared it this morning."

"Heh...as expected of the person in charge of the KoB clearing group. I never thought of eating at all...oh yeah, which shop is this from?"

The sand baguette with the suitably baked bread with vegetables and roast meat in between was a rather high ranking dish amongst my famous shops list. During this time, I'll have this during the clearing. I thought about this as I deliberately asked, but Asuna shrugged her shoulders slightly and gave an answer I was rather surprised by.

"It's not sold."

"Eh?"

"Not sold by shops."

Why must there be silence now? Why aren't you saying anything? I tilted my head to think for a while before realizing. Since it's not bought from an NPC shop, she must have made it herself, this KoB sub-leader.

I spaced out for about 10 seconds before discovering a small crisis. Damn it, what should I say? I already felt awkward ignoring Asuna's get-up in the morning. I couldn't repeat this here now.

"Eh...erm, how to put it...eh, it's a waste to finish it like this. Oh yeah, I might as well auction it at the Alcade market. Probably can earn a lot there hahaha."

GANK! Asuna used her white leather boots to kick the chair hard, causing me to straighten my back and tremble. The tense few minutes pass by, and Asuna finished her share before saying softly,

"...He didn't come here."

"Eh, u, un. Yeah. But according to Schmitt's words, it doesn't seem that he comes around every night. And if that black robed guy was Grimlock, he wouldn't feel like eating after PKing...we probably have to wait for another 2, 3 days."

After speaking quickly, I stood up to check the time again. Only 30 minutes had passed since we started watching, but I was already mentally prepared to wait for Grimlock to appear no matter how long it took, but I wonder what her excellency, the sub-leader thought.

As I thought about this and turned my eyes to her, I found that Asuna, who was leaning deeply into the back of the chair, had no intention of getting up.

...Don't tell me the words I just said was interpreted as 'we'll stay here for two, three days'? As I thought about this while my palms got sweaty, Asuna again whispered,

"I say, Kirito-kun."

"Ye...yes!"

The words that were said next were fortunately—or not, different from what I thought.

"What about you? If you were a member of the Golden Apple guild and got a super rare drop, what would you say?"

"....."

I spaced out and ponder for several seconds before saying,

"...You're right. I've always hated such trouble, which was why I've been fighting solo...in those MMO games I played before SAO, I once experienced seeing other people hiding rare drops or keeping all the profits of the sale to themselves, causing the guild to break up..."

The main motivation for MMO players, basically, is mostly to get that sense of superiority, and I can't deny that. The simplest way to get this sense of superiority is to be 'strong'; through training of the strength and using powerful rare equipment to beat monsters or other players. This feeling of exhilaration as a player, to put it radically, can only be experienced in net-games. Right now, the reason why I will continue to train hard for long periods is undoubtedly to be called a member of the 'clearing group' and get respected by others.

If I'm in a certain guild, and during a party play, we get a very outstanding piece of equipment—and if there's someone suited to equip such a thing in the guild.

Will I say something like 'You should have this'?

"...Probably not."

I whispered this out and shook my head.

"I won't say to my allies that I want it, but I am not a saint who'll smile and hand it over to the other players. That's why...if I'm a member of the Golden Apple, I'll agree with auctioning it out. What about you, Asuna?"

I asked, and Asuna immediately answered without hesitation,

"It'll belong to the one who beat it."

"Heh?"

"For us in KoB, we follow such a rule. Any item that's randomly dropped in a party play would belong to that lucky person who picked it. SAO doesn't have a Combat Log process, so we can only declare what items we get. This is the only method to avoid the hassle to having to hide things, and also..."

At this moment, she paused. She's still looking at the entrance of the inn, but Asuna's expression wasn't that stern anymore.

"...It's because of this kind of system that the responsibility of 'marriage' in this world is so big. Once married, both people's item storage will be linked together, right? In that case, what treasure that can be easily hidden can't be hidden once married. On the other hand, if someone once hid a rare item he picked up, he can't get married to a member of his own guild. The «Storage Link» is actually a rather pragmatic system, but I feel it's rather romantic."

That tone of hers really has a sense of longing. I couldn't help but blink a few times. Then I don't know why I even got excited all of a sudden as I said in an excited voice without thinking much,

"Is, is that so. I see. The, then, if I party with you next time, Asuna, I definitely won't hide any drops I get."

GATAN! With that sound, Asuna immediately fell back together with the chair.

As the room was not lit, I can't see her face, but I can see some expressions on «The Flash»'s face while under the blue and white light. She finally raised her right hand and yelled,

"Do...don't be stupid! Such a day won't happen in ten years! Ah, I, I'm talking about partying with you! I say, are, are you seriously watching? What'll happen if you lose him!"

GA—after such an outburst, Asuna suddenly turned right, even I, who hadn't looked away from the bar even during the conversation, was more or less hurt. But as I wanted to argue back 'I'm looking', I suddenly thought of something.

That ring that caused the Golden Apple to collapse; when it dropped at first, whose storage did it end up in?



Right now, this might not be important, but if the person killed the leader and took the ring away, wouldn't it be a lot simpler to hide the ring right at the beginning? In other words, the one who declared the drop is the only player who couldn't possibly be the one who killed the leader.

On thinking that I should have asked Schmitt more about this, I couldn't help but frown. Asuna and I never registered Schmitt as a friend, so we couldn't send a message to him to check with him. We can send instant messages to each other even though we're not friends if we just know each other's names, but this kind of message couldn't be sent on the same level, and the number of words I can type were rather little.

I'll just ask him the next time we meet. We're not looking into the 'ring incident' half a year ago, but the ongoing «Inside area PK». I wondered as I continued to take out the parchment Schmitt wrote to me.

I said to Asuna, who was giving an incredulous look from the side, 'don't look away from the bar for now', and checked the names of all the Golden Apple members listed on the parchment.

Griselda, Grimlock, Schmitt, Yolko, Caynz...the names were written in messy alphabets, and amongst them, 3 are no longer in this floating castle.

We can't have any more victims. We definitely must find Grimlock and find out how the inside area murders took place.

I told myself this in my heart and got ready to keep the parchment into the item storage.

But just when the small lambskin was about to change from the materialized item into a name in the system—

My stare was suddenly sucked by a point on the parchment.

"...Eh...?"

I hurriedly pulled my eyes near the lambskin, and the Detail Focus System started to take effect, causing the details on the words of the lambskin to increase.

"...Wha, what's this..."

On hearing me mutter, Asuna, who was still staring at the inn, asked something,

"What is it?"

However, I didn't have the mind to answer her question as I merely thought of the significance and the reason of this situation in front of me, and then tried to deduce the intention.

—Several seconds later.

"Ah...ahhh...!"

I shouted as I kicked the chair before getting up. The parchment in my right hand shook violently in response to the shock I got.

"I see...so that's how it is!"

I pant and shouted, and Asuna gave a doubtful, impatient and anxious voice.

"What? You discovered something!?"

"We...we..."

I squeeze my hoarse voice from my throat and closed my eyes hard.

"...We didn't see the truth. We thought we saw it, but we didn't. For the «Inside area murders»—weapons, skills, logic never existed in the first place!!"

Part 9

This is what I heard later on.

The player of the clearing group, Schmitt, who was the leader of the DDA Heavy Armor warriors «Defender» group, didn't think of sleeping nor taking off his heavy metal armor even after returning to his room in the headquarters of his own guild.

His room was located deep inside the stone pal—a fort might be more suitable—and the walls on all four sides had no windows. Actually, nobody other than the guild members could enter the guild headquarters thanks to the system, so it was rather safe for him if he stayed inside the room. Though he told himself this, he couldn't look away from the door.

Will the doorknob silently turn the moment he looks away? Will the death god in the hooded robe glide in like a shadow and unknowingly stand behind him?

The people around him thought that he was a brave tank fighter, but the biggest motivation as to why Schmitt has been fighting hard to maintain his ability amongst the top few in the clearing group was that 'he was scared of death'.

On a certain day about a year and a half ago, after this death game started, he was pondering hard in the middle of the plaza in the Starting City. No, he was bewildered. He wondered what he should do so as to not die. The best means was to stay inside the Starting City and not leave. All the main streets were protected by the «Anti-Criminal Code» absolutely, so if he stayed inside, the digitalized life—the HP bar would not drop at all.

But, Schmitt, who was a netgamer and a sportsman in real life, understood clearly that the rules would change. Could he conclude definitely that the SAO rule where the «city is the safest area» would last forever—until the game was completely cleared? What if on one day, it wouldn't be like an 'inside area' incident, and all the gates had large numbers of monsters rushing in like an avalanche? The players who never left the Starting City without even earning a single experience point would be unable to do anything other than move about in a helter-skelter manner.

That's why, in order to survive, he still had to become stronger. He also had to use safe means and must not take any risks.

Having been bothered over this for the entire day, Schmitt finally chose to 'become sturdy'.

First, he went to the weapons store and bought the strongest armor and shield he could afford and used the remaining money to buy a polearm. He then went to the north gate of the city, found a party that focused the most on safety amongst the numerous parties gathering players and joined them. The first time he went to hunt was to have ten people gather to kill the weakest monster in SAO, the small wild boar.

After that, Schmitt spent a long time to hunt in order to make up for experience and continued to increase in level. The increase in levels were obviously far less than the beaters who were gathered in small groups or fighting solo and carrying out high-risk hunting, but the insistent philosophy towards being 'sturdy' cause him to finally become a leader of the strongest guild in the clearing groups, the «Divine Dragons Alliance».

Thanks to his hard work, Schmitt now can be said to be amongst the strongest in Aincrad in terms of HP, equipment defences and the defensive skills he trained.

He believed that if he was holding the large Guard Lance with his right hand and the Tower Shield in his left hand, he would be able to hang on for 30 minutes even if three monsters of the same level as him attacked from the front. Schmitt just wondered if those people wearing leather armor that was like paper and using offensive-oriented weapons and skills for damage dealing—like a certain black solo player he met several minutes ago—were all weirdos with something wrong in their minds. In fact, amongst all the character builds, the ones with the lowest death rate are really the tanks with sturdy armor. Of course, they lacked the ability to exterminate enemies, so they had to join large parties.

Schmitt, who already had what's considered the «Strongest Defense», could finally shake off the 'fear of death' that had been affecting him. That should be the case.

However—

Right now, there was a killer who could nullify large HP, armor abilities, defensive skills and all sorts of protection the system could provide. Also, this guy was targeting him.

A ghost—of course, he never actually believed that it was a ghost.

No, he couldn't affirm that now. Right now, even the absolute law of the «Anti-Criminal Code» was being bypassed like a black mist by that death god, who used a small short spear and a dagger to take away the lives of others. Wasn't that the electronic ghost created by 'that woman' when she was killed and sent her grudge through the Nerve Gear?

If that's the case, no matter how strong the fort's walls were, how heavy the locks were, or how impenetrable the headquarters of the guild was, none of them would have any effect.

That person will definitely come. She will definitely come over while I'm sleeping and kill me. She'll use the third jagged weapon to stab me and take my life.

Schmitt sat on the bed, using the silver gauntlets to cover his head and pondered.

To escape from her revenge, there was only one path left.

He had to beg for forgiveness. He had to kneel on the ground with his forehead touching the ground to beg for forgiveness and let its vengefulness disperse. He had to personally admit his guilt—half a year ago, he had tried to get stronger. No, he tried to get sturdier, and tried to get into a stronger guild, but made a single mistake—and really regretted it. If he did this, even if the other person was really a ghost, it will forgive me. I was just possessed at that moment. I was captivated by the words of that person and committed such a small crime—no, it can't be considered a crime, just a little rudeness. I didn't expect such a tragedy to occur.

Schmitt swayed slightly and stood up, opened the storage, took out one of the teleport crystals, that were as many as the hills which he would use in emergencies, and materialized it into an object. He clenched it with his right hand in a weak manner, took a deep breath and whispers in a hoarse voice.

"Transfer...«Ralback»"

His sights were covered by the blue light, and the moment the lights became thin, he was already standing in the midst of the night.

It's past 22:00, and this was a cleared level. There didn't seem to be any other players at the transfer gate plaza of the 19th floor. The surrounding shops all had their shutters pulled down, and there were no NPCs walking

outside at all. There was a feeling that he wasn't inside the area, but standing inside the field.

Until half a year ago, the «Golden Apple» was still at a corner of this village, and had a small little guild home here. What should be a very familiar scene here made Schmitt feel like the entire village was resisting him.

The body under the thick armor trembled, and Schmitt continued to walk out of the village, letting his legs, that seemed to be too tired, move forward.

His destination was a small hill that was a 20 minute walk from the main streets. Of course, it would be 'outside the area', and the Anti-Criminal Code wouldn't be in effect. However, Schmitt had a huge reason to go there. He had to go there to let that black-robed death god forgive him. There was no other way.

Schmitt looked like he was dragging his feet as he climbed up the hill, and looked far away at the things that seemed to be standing under the shrubs, and his body trembled intensely.

It was a stone-made tombstone, eroded by wind and covered with moss, the grave of the «Golden Apple», the dead swordswoman Griselda. The moonlight that seemed to be basking down from somewhere imprinted the cross-shaped sign onto the ground. The night wind that would occasionally blow by from time to time blew into the wilted wood, letting out a rustling cry.

The trees and the tombstone here should be just an ordinary landmark, and it was a scenery-like decoration the designer had casually set up. However, several days after Griselda was killed, and when the Golden Apple had been disbanded, the remaining seven people decided to use this place as her tomb and buried her long sword here—or more accurately, put it at the bottom of the tombstone and let its durability decrease such that it would disappear naturally.

That was why the tombstone didn't have an inscription on it. But if he wanted to confess his sins to Griselda, this would be the only place.

Schmitt wordlessly knelt down, almost rolling as he crawled in front of the tomb.

He put his forehead on the ground that was mixed with sand, his teeth grit a few times before he could finally open his open it with all he had, saying in an unexpectedly clear voice,

"I'm sorry...it's my fault...forgive me, Griselda! I...I, didn't expect things to end up like this...I had never thought of killing you!!"

『Really...?』

A voice could be heard with a strange echo. It sounded like a woman's voice from the ground.

Trying his best not to let his consciousness waver, Schmitt timidly looked up.

Deep inside the shadows of the twisted tree branches, there was a black-clothed shadow that appeared silently. It was covered in a pitch black hooded robe, its sleeves down, and it was impossible to see what was inside the hood in the darkness.

However, Schmitt felt a sharp stare coming from there and used both hands to cup his mouth that was about to let out a cry tightly before hurriedly nodding a few times.

"It...it's true. I didn't know anything! I just...just followed orders, just...a little thing..."

『What did you do...? What did you do to me, Schmitt...?』

Slowly, Schmitt used his widened eyes to look at a thin and long black line that reached out from the right sleeve of the robe.

It was a sword, but extremely fine. It was a one-handed sword almost no one used, the close-ranged piercing-type weapon «Estoc». The blade that looked like a large needle had lots of spikes that were rounded in a spiral shape.

The third «Spiked weapon».

Hiiii!! The soft whimper came from deep within his throat. Schmitt put his forehead down onto the ground for the umpteenth time.

"I...I just...on the day we had decided to sell the ring, I found a memo and a crystal in my belt pouch...and there was an instruction....."

『Who was it, Schmitt?』

This time, it was a man's voice.

『Whose instruction was it...?』

The stiff neck cringed again, and Schmitt just looked frozen.

He tried forcefully to lift that metal-like heavy head and glanced over. The second death god appeared near the shadows of the trees. He had the same design on him, wearing a black hooded robe, but was just slightly taller than the first one.

"...Grimlock...?"

Lowering his head slightly, Schmitt whimpers with what was barely a voice.

"You're...you're dead too.....?"

The death god didn't answer, but wordlessly stepped forward. From under the hood, an ominous and distorted voice could be heard.

『Who...who instigated you...?』

"I...I DON'T KNOW! IT'S TRUE!!"

Schmitt frantically shouted out.

"THE MEMO...THE MEMO JUST WROTE THAT I WAS TO FOLLOW THE LEADER...THAT WHEN SHE MOVED INTO THE INN AND WENT OUT OF HER ROOM TO EAT, I WAS TO SECRETLY PUT THE TRANSFER CRYSTAL AT A SPOT INSIDE HER ROOM AND, AND PUT THE CRYSTAL INTO THE GUILD STORAGE. THAT, THAT'S ALL THAT WAS WRITTEN...I, I ONLY DID THIS! I DIDN'T TOUCH GRISELDA AT ALL! THA...THAT PERSON ACTUALLY STOLE THE RING AND KILLED HER...I, I DIDN'T THINK THIS WOULD HAPPEN AT ALL!"

Just when Schmitt was defending himself, the two death gods remained unmoved. The night wind blew by, causing the wilted plants and robes to sway.

The fear continued to rise up in Schmitt's mind as he approached his limit, and immediately, he recalled.

On that day half a year ago, he took out the parchment from his belt pouch, and the moment he saw it, he felt that it was really reckless and was shocked by it, and yet amazed by such an ingenious method.

The room in the inn would normally be locked, but aside from the time for sleeping, anyone who was designated as a friend or a guild member could open it. He could use this point to set the transfer crystal inside the room and enter while the owner of the room was sleeping. He just needed to use the trade function to move the hand of the other party to drag the ring and press the confirm button.

There was a risk that the person would be accidentally discovered, but Schmitt's instincts told him that this was the only way to steal an item inside the area. The last part of the memo noted that the reward would be half of the money earned from the sale of the ring. If he was successful, he could get 4 times the reward, but if he failed—if the leader woke up during the trade and saw the face, she would only see the one who gave him the memo, the criminal in this ring incident. Even if that guy wanted to drag him down later, he just had to insist that he didn't know. He was to enter the room and set up the transfer target over there, so there wouldn't be any evidence.

Schmitt was at a loss, but this loss meant that he betrayed the guild and the leader, all just to enter the clearing group immediately. Of course, if this could help with them clearing the game, it would help the leader out in the end. Schmitt thought of this to justify his actions and followed the instructions on the memo.

The next night, Schmitt learnt that the leader was killed. A day later, he found that there was a bag with a deposit on his bed.

"I...was, really scared! If I told everyone else about the memo, everyone would eye me...so, that is why, I had no idea who wrote the memo at all!! Please, please forgive me, Griselda, Grimlock. I, I really never thought of becoming a killer's accomplice. Please believe me, please...!"

Schmitt continued to press his head against the ground, letting out a sharp whimper.

A sudden gust of night wind blew by as the tree branches rustled.

The moment the sounds subsided, the ominous echoes up till now vanished like a lie, and the woman's voice without the ominous echo rang silently.

"I recorded it all, Schmitt."

He heard this—a voice that he had just heard recently. Schmitt timidly lifted his face and widened his eyes in shock.

She removed her pitch black hood, and what appeared inside was the face of the victim who was definitely killed by the robed death god several hours ago. The dark purple wavy hair swayed with the wind.

"...Yolko...?"

Schmitt asked with a voice so soft that it could barely be considered a voice, and looked at the death god beside Yolko who also revealed his true identity. He was about to pass out as he whispered,

"...Caynz."

Part 10

"They, they're still alive, that means...!?"

Asuna was shocked as she cried out, and I slowly nodded my head.

"Un, they're still alive. Both Yolko-san and Kains-shi."

"Bu, but then...but."

Asuna continued to pant a few times and clasp the hands at her knees together before arguing back with a hoarse tone.

"But...didn't we see it yesterday. Kains-san's...death when he was pierced by the black spear and left to hang at the window."

"No."

I shake my head violently.

"What we saw was Kains-shi's avatar and lots of polygons scattered all over the place to make it look like he disappeared from the scene."

"So, so that means, this isn't 'death' in this world?"

"...Do you still remember? Yesterday, Kains-shi, who was dangling at the window of the church was always staring at a spot in the sky."

I point my right index finger in front of me and said. Asuna nodded her head slightly.

"That's the HP bar, right? He was looking at the continuous pierce damage whittle down his HP bit by bit..."

"That's what I thought, too, but this wasn't the case. He wasn't looking at the HP bar, but the durability of the full-plate armor he was equipped with."

"Du, durability?"

"Un, this morning, when I was experimenting with the continuous pierce damage inside the area, didn't I take off the glove on my left hand? Inside the area, the HP won't drop no matter what the player does, but the durability will drop...it's like the sand baguettes we just ate. Of course, the durability of equipment won't drop naturally like food, but that's if they're not damaged. Listen up. That time, when Kains' armor was pierced

through, what the spear wore out wasn't his HP, but the durability of the armor."

On hearing this, Asuna, who had been frowning till now, widened her eyes.

"The, then...it was Kains-san's armor that shattered..."

"That's right. It's the armor he was wearing. I already felt that it was weird why he wore such thick armor even though they were just having a meal...that was worn to make him look obvious when he exploded into polygons. The moment the armor was destroyed, Kains-shi..."

"Use the crystal to teleport away."

Asuna closed her eyes to recall that image in her mind, and said.

"...This resulted in a 'phenomenon where a blue light is given as polygons are shattered and scattered, indicating that the player died'...in other words, it looks like a death effect, but in fact, it was completely different."

"Un, Kains-shi probably took the spear outside the area and stabbed it into him with the armor, used the teleport crystal to move back to the second level of the church, hang himself with the rope and wait till the armor's about to be destroyed before jumping off and teleporting away while the armor was wrecked...something like that..."

Asuna nodded slowly yet forcefully, closed her eyes and heaved out a few words.

"...Then, Yolko-san's 'disappearance' is the same trick, too...right.....so they're still alive..."

Asuna never let out her voice as she merely moved her lips, muttering 'thank goodness', but again bit her lips.

"Bu, but, she was definitely wearing thick armor, but when did the throwing dagger stab her? If it is inside the area, it should probably be blocked by the code, and it would be impossible for it to hit her.

"It was already on her right from the beginning."

I immediately answered.

"Think about it carefully. When Schmitt, you and I entered the room, she never let us see her back. On receiving our message that we were going to visit her, she first ran outside to stab the dagger into her back before

returning to the inn. With that hairstyle of hers, if she just sat down properly on the sofa, she would be able to hide the very small dagger handle completely, take note of the durability of the clothing, talk to us, see that the timing was about there, retreat to the window, use the foot to kick the wall or something to create a sound, turn her back against us, and make it look like the dagger was stabbed into her at that moment."

"So she fell out of the window...to prevent us from hearing the command of the transfer...in that case, that black robe you had chased after, Kirito-kun, that was..."

"There's a very likely chance that it wasn't Grimlock, but Kains."

I made this conclusion, and Asuna looked up at the sky before heaving a short sigh.

She frowned as she moved towards me.

"Didn't we head to the Black Iron Palace yesterday to check the «Monument of Life»? Kains-san's death was clearly crossed out, the time of death was the same, and the cause of death was also 'Continuous Pierce Damage'."

"Do you remember the spelling of that Kains-san?"

"Erm...I remember it was K, a, i, n, s, like that."

"Un, Yolko-san told that to us and we naturally believed it. But...look at this."

I handed the parchment that became the clue to solving this case over to Asuna. Several hours ago, Schmitt wrote down the list of members of «Golden Apple». Asuna reached out to take it, looked at the parchment for a bit and shouted out "EHHH!!?"

"«Caynz»....!? Is this the way Caynz-san's name was written!?"

"It would be understandable if it was just one character, but if 3 characters were wrong, it probably isn't Schmitt's memory at fault, but Yolko-san gave us the wrong spelling. She started with K to log Kains-san's death and mistake him for Caynz-san, who starts with C."

"Eh...that, that means..."

Asuna's expression stiffened, and her tone hush down.

"At that time...we witnessed C Caynz-san's fake death, and that K Kains-san died under the continuous piercing damage at some place in Aincrad? It's probably...not a coincidence, is it...? Don't tell me..."

"No no."

I smiled slightly and waved my right hand hard.

"It wasn't that Yolko was the accomplice and killed K at that moment. Listen up. The death records on the Monument of Life indicated that it was the 'Month of Sakura, day 22, 18:27'...and in Aincrad. It was the second time that the month of Sakura, 22nd April happened."

"Ah..."

Asuna couldn't say anything at that moment, and could only give a weak smile.

"...So it was like that. I didn't consider this at all. Last year, on the same day and the same time, that Kains-san died without being involved in this case..."

"Yeah. Most likely, this was the start of the plan."

I took a deep breath again, clearing my thoughts in my mind as I continued to say,

"...Yolko-san and Caynz-shi probably knew early on that this Kains who had a similar sounding name but different spelling died last year in April. At first, it was probably just random talk, but they probably realized later on that they could use this coincidence to fake Caynz-shi's death, and not in a normal death in battle against a monster...but a frightening method to enact an 'inside area murder'."

"...It's true that I was fooled just like you. The same time of death as someone else who had a similarly sounding name, destroying the inside area installation through continuous piercing damage, and a transfer crystal...with these three things, they could let the inside area PK look just like the real thing...and the aim for this doing is...."

Asuna whispered softly.

"To force the culprit of the 'ring incident' to appear and let him be suspected as the culprit. Yolko-san and Caynz-san acted this murder incident out to create a fake 'avenger', a death god that could ignore the

Anti-Criminal code and carry out PK inside the area...and in the end, the one driven by this fear was..."

"Schmitt."

I nodded and used my fingers to touch my chin.

"He probably just doubted at the beginning...Schmitt went from the middle level «Golden Apple» guild, and managed to join the largest clearing guild, the «Divine Dragons Alliance». That would really be a unique situation. Without leveling up quickly or changing equipment quickly...it should be impossible."

"The conditions to join the DDA are already very strict...then, was he the culprit in this ring incident...? Did he kill Griselda and take the ring...?"

Asuna, who had seen Schmitt many times as an advisor in the clearing group strategic meetings, looked rather nervous and stared at me.

My mind immediately thought of the profile of that spear-user, and I shook my head slowly.

"...I can't tell. There's information to provide suspicion...but as to whether that guy has the presence of a «red»..."

The killers in SAO, called red players, would more or less have a strange presence around them, but this was to be expected. That is because those players who killed other players in this world are basically preventing this game from being cleared. To put it a little more drastically, red players are people who have the thinking that 'it doesn't matter whether we get out of here or not' — or more radically, they hope for 'this death game to continue'.

Such a negative tone would definitely appear in terms of words. However, I couldn't detect any madness of a 'red' from Schmitt, who was thoroughly scared of the black-clothed death god and requested us to escort him back to his headquarters.

"...I can't tell, but he's definitely involved in that, and that can explain things thoroughly..."

On hearing me say that, Asuna nodded in agreement, leaning against the back of one of two chairs that were lined at the window. She seemed to forget looking at the bar opposite as she looked up into the sky above the streets.

"...No matter what, Schmitt is forced into a tight spot now. He believes that there's someone after him for revenge, and feels that the area...no, even the headquarters of the guild isn't safe. Then...what will he do next?"

"If there was an accomplice, he will probably contact that person. Yolko-san and Caynz-shi were probably waiting for that. But if Schmitt doesn't know where the accomplice is, un —— if it's me..."

What would I do? If I killed a player out of greed and hatred and felt absolutely remorseful about it, what would I do?

Up till now, I haven't taken the life of any player in this world, but there were friends of mine who died because of me, because of my foolishness and ugly ego that caused everyone in my guild other than me to die, and I had always regretted that. I used a tree that grew from the garden of a certain inn which we used as a home as their grave. It's not really considered asking for redemption, but I would often bring wine and flowers over. So, Schmitt probably——

"...If Griselda-san has a grave, he will definitely go there to beg for forgiveness."

Asuna seemed to detect the change in my tone as she looked up from the chair at me and smiled in a steady manner.

"That's right. I will do that, too. At the headquarters of the KoB, there are graves for the people who died in boss battles —— that's right, maybe, Yolko-san and Caynz-san will definitely be there...at Griselda-san's grave, waiting for Schmitt-san to appear..."

Silence came suddenly, and her expression became gloomy.

"...? What is it?"

"Uun...it's just that I thought of this. What if Griselda-san's grave is outside the area? If Schmitt-san goes there...will Yolko-san and Caynz-san forgive him just like that? I don't think it's actually possible, but maybe they might really carry out revenge..."

This unexpected theory caused my back to tense up.

I can't say that it's impossible. Yolko and Caynz spent so much effort trying to act out the 'inside the area murders', so they should have some level of hatred to the culprit in the ring incident. They should have at least used up two teleport crystals. Considering their levels, this should be a rather large

expense. They had gone through so much, so would they only be satisfied with getting a confession...?"

"Ah...no...actually...?"

I shook my head after noticing something.

"No, they won't. Those two would definitely never kill Schmitt?"

"How can you deduce this?"

"You still have Yolko-san's name registered in your friend list, right, Asuna? You didn't see a message indicating that she had removed the friend registration at all, did you?"

"Ahh...speaking of which, that's true. I believed that it would have been removed automatically after the second murder incident in the inn, but if she's still alive, we should still be in contact with each other.

Asuna moved her left hand to summon the window, and after operating quickly, nodded back in affirmation.

"It is still registered. If I had realized this, we could have realized a trick going on with this case...but in that case, why did Yolko-san accept the friend request? We could have seen through the entire plan from here."

"Most likely..."

I closed my eyes, and this time, what was ingrained in my mind was a female profile with deep purple wavy hair.

"...It's atonement for lying to us and proof that she trusted us. Even if we noticed the record on the friend list and found out that she's still alive, we could deduce their true intent and not prevent them from baiting Schmitt. Asuna, try tracking Yolko-san's position."

I open my eyes as I said that. Asuna nodded and again hit the window.

"...Right now, she's in the field on the 19th floor, a hill slightly away from the main streets...what's over there is..."

"The grave of the Golden Apple leader, Griselda. Caynz and Schmitt should be there, too. If Schmitt dies there, we can tell that they killed him, so they probably won't do so."

"The...then what about the other way around? Will Schmitt kill both of them to shut them up after finding out his role in the ring incident...?"

Asuna asked in a worried manner. I pondered for a while and still shook my head.

"No...we'll find that out, too. Besides, that person can't accept being a criminal, no, a killer, and get released by the clearing group, so I guess we don't have to worry about them killing each other...just leave it to them. Our role in this incident is over. We were had by Yolko-san this time, but...I don't hate them for this."

On hearing this, Asuna pondered for a while, and then gave me an affirmative smile.

However, Asuna and I didn't even see half the truth in this incident.

This incident still wasn't over yet.

Part 11

Let's continue on with what I had heard later on.

Schmitt was so shocked that he couldn't breathe, looking back and forth at the two players' faces under their death god's robes.

The true identities of what he had thought to be Griselda and Grimlock were unexpectedly Yolko and Caynz. However, these two should be dead. He had only heard that Caynz was dead, but as for Yolko — just several hours ago, he witnessed her death personally — she was stabbed by the black dagger from outside the window, fell onto the streets and her avatar exploded into polygons.

They're ghosts? Schmitt nearly passed out, but the words Yolko said before she showed her face barely managed to keep Schmitt conscious.

"Re...recording...?"

The hoarse voice was barely squeezed out from his throat as Yolko pulled her hand out from her robe to show Schmitt, revealing an eight-sided pillar shaped crystal that gave off a light green glow; a recording crystal.

Ghosts probably didn't use items to record voices.

In that case, Yolko and Caynz's deaths were all a pretense. He couldn't imagine how they did it, but both of them acted out their own 'deaths' to create an avenger that didn't exist in the first place, and forced the 3rd person into a dead end for the sake of vengeance. They recorded the confession of the 3rd person admitting his guilt and asking for forgiveness, all — as part of a plan to unravel what happened in a murder incident in the past.

"...So...that's how it is..."

Schmitt finally realized the truth, muttered weakly in a voice that was barely audible, and immediately collapsed.

He wasn't enraged that he was fooled so thoroughly, nor that the evidence was taken from him, but amazed by Yolko and Caynz's persistence — their admiration of Griselda.

"You two...really respect leader..."

Caynz quietly answered in his weak voice.

"Aren't you the same?"

"Eh...?"

"Aren't you the same, like us? You never hated the leader at all, did you? No matter how much you desired the ring, you wouldn't develop any malice towards her, am I right?"

"Of...of course I didn't. Really, trust me."

Schmitt's face twisted as he continued nodding.

In terms of battle ability, even if both of them teamed up on him, they were probably not stronger than him. However, Schmitt didn't think of immediately drawing his weapon to shut them both up. First, if he fell as a red player, he wouldn't be able to continue staying in the guild and the clearing group. And more importantly, if he killed Yolko and Caynz here, Schmitt was very certain that he could never revert to his normal self.

That's why Schmitt continued to repeat the mistake he made in the past even when the recording crystal was active.

"What I did...was that I sneaked into the leader's room and set the portal. And because of this...I used the money I earned from this to buy some high-level weapons and armor, so I cleared the requirements to enter DDA..."

"It is true that you didn't know who wrote the memo, right?"

Yolko asked sternly, and Schmitt nodded hard again.

"I, I still don't know who it was. Amongst the 8 of us, if you minus me off, you two, leader and Grimlock, there should be 3 people left...but I never contacted them after that...don't you have any clue?"

In face of Schmitt's question, Yolko could only shake her head gently.

"The three of them joined a middle-ranked guild that was similar to the «Golden Apple» after it was disbanded and lived ordinary lives. None of them bought any rare equipment or player homes. You were the only one who stepped up so quickly, Schmitt."

".....I see..."

Schmitt said, and lowered his head.

When Griselda died, the leather bag that was sent to his room had an unbelievably large sum of money. At that point, he could buy all of the high ability equipment that he could only water his mouth at.

If the person didn't spend that kind of money and put it inside the storage, that person had an iron heart. No, before this——

Schmitt looked up and immediately forgot the circumstances he was in and said the doubt that grew within him.

"...Bu, but, won't this be too weird...if the person didn't need that money, then why did he kill the leader and steal the ring...?"

Yolko and Caynz heard this unexpected question, and their upper body tilted back slightly.

In Aincrad, there was no benefit in putting money earned inside their storage. The value of 1 col was based on the drop rate maintained by the Cardinal System, kept constant at all times, which meant that inflation or depreciation would never happen. Even if players did buy high priced swords and armor, as long as they maintained the equipment properly, they could earn back about the same amount of money on a day they didn't need it. Therefore it was pointless not to use the money. In other words——

"The one...who sent the memo was..."

Schmitt continued to think hard and was about to say a deduction that vaguely appeared in his mind.

However, as he was too focused, it was too late when he noticed 'that'.

"SCH...!!"

Just when Yolko in front of him shouted, a small dagger was stabbed into his neck from behind him, right at the gap between the breastplate and the throat plate. It was the skill combo of «Armor Pierce» that a small stab weapon used, and the «Sneaking» skill that was used on non-metallic armor——

After a moment of shock, Schmitt quickly turned back with the response ability he had trained from the frontlines. Even if his throat was stabbed open, he wouldn't die immediately. It was a fatal point, and the damage would be great, but it would still be far less compared to Schmitt's vast HP amount.

However,

Just when he was about to turn around, Schmitt's feet lost their senses, and he collapsed onto the ground with a clank. His HP bar was surrounded by a green flash. It indicated the state of paralysis. As a tank, his anti-poison skill should have increased by quite a bit, but this was a rather high level poison that could negate resistance. Who was——

"One, down."

The boyish innocent voice came from above Schmitt, and he hurriedly looked up.

First, he saw a black leather boot with what looked like a sharp thumbtack. The person also had black tight-fitting leather pants, and the leather armor on him was black too. His right hand was holding onto a long and thin knife that was dipped in green, while his left hand was in his pocket.

The head had a mask that looked like a 'sack', leaving only circular holes at the eyes. Realizing that there was a sticky stare at him, Schmitt's sights showed the cursor of the player. It wasn't a normal green color, but a bright orange color.

"Ah...!"

Schmitt heard a soft cry and turned around to see a small-sized player holding a really thin sword and threatening Yolko and Caynz. He was dressed completely in black too, but the clothing wasn't made of leather. It was a piece of ragged clothing that reached from top to bottom. His face had a mask that looked like a skull, and the dark eyeholes look like they were giving off glowing red eyes. The right hand was holding what was most likely the same kind of Estoc that Yolko was holding, but the bronze that was giving off a bloody color explained its overwhelming nature. The cursor was orange as well.

The guy with the skull mask took the black Estoc easily from the dazed Yolko's right hand. He glanced at the blade and let out a voice that seemed to have static in it.

"The design is, not too bad. Let's, add, it, to my, collection."

Schmitt knew of these two people. He had never met them directly before, but amongst the bulletin circulated through the guild headquarters, the top

most player had a sketch of them amongst the list of the players that they were supposed to be wary of.

In a certain sense, they were the biggest enemy of the clearing group, bigger than the boss monsters, the red players. They were the male players in the largest savage guild who were the executives. The poisoned dagger user who paralyzed Schmitt was «Johnny Black», and the Estoc user who held down Yolko and Caynz was «Red-Eyed XaXa».

In that case, don't tell me — 'that guy' took part too?

You're lying! Don't! This isn't the time for jokes!

As if betraying the cries inside Schmitt's heart, JARI JARI, the sound of footsteps could be heard.

Schmitt tentatively looked behind and stared over with his widened eyes. He could feel the figure of the biggest terror in Aincrad.

The person was wearing a dull black poncho that covered him down to his knees and a hood that was attached, covering the eyes.

The person was holding a rectangular-shaped giant dagger that looked like a Chinese chopping knife and a blood-like reddish-black blade.

".....«PoH»..."

Schmitt muttered the name out from his lips and started trembling hard as if he saw terror and despair.

The killing guild «Laughing Coffin».

The guild was established half a year after the death game called SAO was created. Before this, they were orange players who just surrounded solo players or a few players with a large number of them to steal col or items, and their extremist thoughts caused them to become such a radical group.

That thought was — «If it's a death game, killing people is a must»..

In modern Japan, 'legal killing' wasn't allowed, but in such an extreme situation, it became possible. All the players' physical bodies were all in FullDive state, which meant that they were unconscious and couldn't even move a finger. In terms of the legal implications in Japan, the designer of Nerve Gear, Akihiko Kayaba, would be the culprit as the player will be

'killed' by this death mechanism instead of decreasing the HP bar when the HP dropped to zero.

——If that's the case, just kill and enjoy the game. This is a right given to all players.

——The one who gave such a poisonous reasoning to lure and brainwash several orange players and caused them to go on a mad PK craze was the black-poncho clothed guy with the dagger, PoH.

Unlike the amusing sounding name, this tall guy giving off an icy cold stare walked towards Schmitt and simply commanded.

"Turn him over."

Johnny Black immediately reached the front tip of the foot into Schmitt's stomach and kicked him to flip him up. The black chopper-wielding guy saw Schmitt's face as he laid weakly there, and said again,



"Wow...it's true. This guy is one huge prey. Isn't this a leader-sama of the DDA?"

Even though it was a very nice sounding voice, for some reason, there was a deep weird feeling coming with it. He couldn't see the face covered by the hood, but the ample wavy black hair was dangling on the side, swaying with the night wind.

Having realized his own circumstance of despair, Schmitt continued to still think of why this was happening.

Why would the three of them appear in such a place? The top 3 of the «Laughing Coffin» were a symbol of terror, the highest class fugitive. They couldn't possibly come over here for sightseeing.

In other words, the three of them knew that Schmitt was here before attacking.

But this wouldn't be enough to explain it. He never told the people from DDA where he was going, and Yolko and Caynz couldn't possibly leak any information. The two of them were now being threatened by the Estoc of «Red-Eyed XaXa» and looking completely pale. Even if Schmitt, who was moving on his own at the 19th floor, was discovered by a Laughing Coffin member that contacted PoH, it was way too fast for them to appear.

Was there something else that caused the three of them to appear on this floor coincidentally? Was this a huge misfortune that could only happen with a one in ten thousand chance? Or, this coincidence was the revenge of the deceased Griselda...?"

PoH looked down at Schmitt, who was pondering with interrupted thoughts and lying down like a tree branch, and tilted his head slightly.

"Then...it's showtime. But even if I want to do this...how should we play?"

"Then, use that, head."

Johnny Black said with an excited tone.

"The «Kill each other and let the survivor live» game, but we might have to balance the sides with the three of them."

"Even though you say so, don't you kill off the surviving player?"

"Ah, auhh! We can't play this game if you say it out loud, head!"

On hearing this chilling conversation that lacked any tension, XaXa merely cackled while raising the Estoc.

Right now, Schmitt was overwhelmed by the realistic terror and despair, and couldn't help but close his eyes.

The metallic armor that covered his entire body was just a heavy stone when he couldn't move. They quickly stopped by to joke as if it was before a meal, baring their bloodhound-like teeth. PoH's large dagger «Mate Chopper» was a monster drop that not even the highest leveled craftsmen's best created weapons could match, and it was a «Demonic Sword». It should be able to easily pierce through the full plate armor rating on Schmitt.

——Griselda, Grimlock.

If this is your revenge on me, it can't be helped if I die here.

But, why must you implicate Yolko and Caynz? Both of them who they spent so much effort trying to nab the culprit who killed you two? Why?

Just when Schmitt's mind was occupied with thoughts of despair.

On the ground clinging behind, there was a slight vibration.

DODODO! DODODO! There was a rhythmic beat rumbling getting louder and clearer gradually. Soon, the ears were able to hear that deep rumbling.

PoH used a sharp breathing to warn his two subordinates. Johnny readied his poisoned dagger and retreated while XaXa put the Estoc closer to Yolko and Caynz's necks.

Schmitt continued to rotate the neck he couldn't move desperately, and saw a white fluorescent line coming in a straight line from the main streets.

Several seconds later, he could tell that the trembling light on the path was cold flame surrounding a pitch black horse that seemed to melt in the darkness. The horse had a pitch black rider riding it too, like a certain undead rider from hell riding down the blazing white flames in a lightning quick speed. The sound of the gallops became a rumble as it shook the ground, overlapping with the neighs of the horse.

The horse soon reached the bottom of the hill, leapt several times before reaching the top. It used its hind legs to help it stand, and the nostrils let

out a burning white presence. Johnny looked like he was overwhelmed by the presence as he retreated. Then, the rider on the horse forcefully pulled the leash —— and immediately dropped down from the horse's back.

DOSK! The person fell onto the ground on the butt and grumbled 'it hurts!' in a very familiar voice.

The intruder who rubbed his waist as he stood up held onto the leash of the large black horse, stared at Schmitt, then at Yolko and Caynz before letting out a relaxed tone.

"Barely safe. The taxi fare will have to be provided by DDA."

In Aincrad, there wasn't any item that allowed for mounting. However, at a few stables run by NPCs on the streets or villages, one could go over there to rent a horse or an ox to move a large number of items the storage couldn't handle. But if someone wanted to ride, a certain level of skill would be needed and the expenses were really expensive, so almost no one used it. In this death game, they would be very few people who would have the luxury of spare time to learn horse riding——

Schmitt exhaled the air that was vented inside his chest and looked at the intruder, the face of the solo player in the clearing group, the «Black Swordsman» Kirito.

Kirito pulled the leash and turned the horse before slapping its hind. The black horse was released from rent, and the sound of it galloping away could be heard, overlapping the voice that seemed to lack courage.

"Yo, PoH. Long time no see. You're still in that strange get-up."

"...I don't want to be told that by you."

PoH's response had a killing intent that couldn't be hidden.

Johnny Black then stepped forward and obviously raised his voice.

"You bastard...! Aren't you the relaxed one!? Don't you know the situation you're in!?"

Using his left hand to stop his subordinate who was swinging the dagger, PoH raised the chopper knife in his right hand onto the shoulder from behind and tapped.

"It's just like what this guy said, Kirito. The cool entrance is good, but even you can't handle the three of us alone at the same time, right?"

Schmitt, who was still paralyzed, clenched his left hand which was the only one that he could move.

The situation was just like what PoH described. Even Kirito, who had top-notch fighting ability amongst the clearing group, couldn't possibly beat the top 3 of Laughing Coffin at the same time. Why? At least he should have brought «The Flash» along too?

"Well, it's impossible."

Kirito calmly answered with the left hand on his waist, but he quickly continued.

"But I already drank an antidote potion and brought many healing crystals, so I should be able to hang on for about 10 minutes. With this, I should be able to hang on until the reinforcements arrive. Either way, do you think the three of you can take on 30 people from the clearing group?"

PoH, who was retorted back with a line that was almost the same, clicked his tongue under the hood. Johnny and XaXa looked around at the surrounding darkness in unrest.

"...Suck."

Soon, PoH cursed and moved his right foot back.

He snapped his left finger, and his subordinates went several meters back. Yolko and Caynz were released by the red Estoc and knelt down weakly.

PoH raised the chopper in his right hand and pointed it at Kirito, growling,

"...«Black Swordsman». One of these days, I'll make you crawl on the ground while your important comrades are rolling in the tragic sea of blood. Just wait and see."

After saying that, he spun the large chopper knife on his fingers skillfully before putting it into the holster at his waist. The black leather poncho swayed, and the leader of «Laughing Coffin» turned around before jumping off the hill nonchalantly while the other two subordinates followed suit.

Johnny Black still looked like he was worried about the clearing group that was about to rush here as he quickly walked away, and the Estoc user under the ragged mantle—Red-Eyed XaXa took a few steps forward before turning back, staring at Kirito with the faint glowing eyes under the skull before whispering,

"Looks, cool there. Next time, I will ride on a horse, to hunt you down."

"...Then, please practice as much as you can. It's not as easy as it looks."

On hearing Kirito's response, XaXa let out a deep breathing sound before chasing after his allies and disappearing.

Part 12

The three shadows walked down the hill and vanished into the night. I continued to stare at the orange cursor that came with the Searching Enemy Skill effect.

I once met the leader of Laughing Coffin, PoH, and exchanged words with him, but this is the first time I've met his subordinates; the poison dagger user with the childish attitude and appearance, and the Estoc user wearing a very tattered robe. Of course, their names weren't indicated in the cursor. To play it safe, I intended to ask Schmitt their names later, but after thinking about it, we'll probably be fighting for real the next time we meet. To be honest, I really don't want to know the names of these two people when we will have to kill each other using swords.

Thus, I've watched them until the Searching Enemy Skill cursor's range could no longer detect them.

Criminal players normally couldn't enter the streets and villages that have the «Anti-Criminal Code» in them. Once they stepped inside the area, they would be attacked by a large number of NPC guards that were as strong as demons. All the transfer gates on each floor were all located in the main streets of each floor, so if those three wanted to move to another floor, they could only use a teleport crystal to move to 'a village outside the area', use a very expensive corridor crystal, or walk down the dungeon tower that were cleared to move up and down.

I guess they probably used the first method, but this alone would mean that they had to use up 6 teleport crystals going to and fro, and to those guys, this isn't a small expense. I swallowed my saliva and watch the 3 cursors disappear from my sights before subconsciously heaving a sigh of relief.

Seriously, these are guys that I didn't expect to show up at all. Those three guys actually knew that Schmitt — a forward leader of the Divine Dragons Alliance Guild with the highest HP and defenses, would appear at this location.

However, I guess it's possible to know immediately where the source of this information came from.

I turned my sights away from the wilderness that was covered in darkness, summoned the window and quickly responded to Klein, who should be

bringing more than 10 people here, with, [Laughing Coffin escaped. Wait in town].

I then take out the antidote potion from my pouch and put it in Schmitt's hand. I looked at this hulking guy drink it down with trembling hands and looked away to the other two who were slightly further away.

It couldn't be helped that I had some sarcasm in my tone to the two players who dressed up as death gods and were looking really pale now.

"Nice to meet you again, Yolko-san, and...nice to meet you for the first time, Caynz-san."

Yolko, who should have scattered into many polygons several hours ago and disappeared, looks up at me and grimaced.

"I wanted to apologize to you after everything was over...you probably wouldn't believe me even if I said so."

"Whether I believe you or not, I'll have to see what you treat me. Let me say this first. Don't give me some suspicious looking ramen or okonomiyaki."

Standing beside the dazed Yolko, the stiff looking guy takes off his black robe — the first murder victim of this 'inside area' incident Caynz lowered his head.

"We've met for the first time — probably not, Kirito-san. Our eyes did meet at that moment."

The words that were said in such a calm manner caused me to finally recall.

"Speaking of which, it was really like that. You died by, ah, no, you teleported away the moment your armor was destroyed, right?"

"Un, that's right. I had a premonition at that moment that you might see the truth behind this fake death."

"You've overestimated me. I was completely fooled."

This time, it's my turn to give a wry smile. The air that had finally calmed down tensed up again with the clinking of the armor on Schmitt.

"...Thank you for saving me there, Kirito...but how did you know that those three would come here?"

I looked back at the giant's face that was looking straight at me and pondered on what to say.

"It's not that I knew, but a possibility I deduced. If I had known that PoH would be the enemy, I would have run away in fear, too."

This vague answer that came out unconsciously was not without a reason, too.

What I'm going to say is probably going to bring a huge shock to the three of them — especially Yolko and Caynz. The two of them who wrote the entire script and proceeded with the act with them as the lead didn't notice that there was a 'producer' behind this, hiding in a corner. I heaved a sigh and started to narrate with a voice as calm as possible.

"...It was just 30 minutes ago when I felt that it was weird..."

The incident ended, so I should hand things over to Yolko, Caynz and Schmitt.

On the second level of an inn that had a clear view of a certain bar on the 20th floor, I said this to Asuna and leaned my back on the chair.

They probably wouldn't start killing each other. Then, it's better of the person who started this 'ring incident' and triggered this 'inside area incident'. I noted confidently, and Asuna answered 'yeah' and nodded in agreement.

In the midst of the silence — I suddenly felt that inside my chest, there was some really thin piercing feeling inside me.

There should be something I had to think about. There was definitely something I had to think about. But I didn't know what it was. It was that kind of anxiety.

What Asuna said just now when we were watching the bar seemed to be related to the feeling right now. I just had this thought and inadvertently said to her. "Well..."

"...What is it?"

I looked at the KoB sub-leader-sama, who sat on the chair and looked up. I used about 80 percent of my analytical ability to analyze this sense of disagreement and asked a very thoughtless question.

"Asuna, have you, gotten married before?"

The response to this question was a bone-chilling stare with killing-intent. She also stood ready to attack with a tightly clenched right fist with body leaning forward.

"JUST JOKING! FORGET ABOUT IT! IT DOESN'T COUNT!"

I hurriedly shouted as I was grabbed by the front while my hands and head were shaking frantically, and I hurriedly added on.

"It's not like that, nothing really behind this...didn't you just mention about marriage?"

"I did say so. So what?"

She continued to stare at me viciously. I started to tremble, but continued to force myself to say,

"Erm...to be specific, it's something you said...something romantic and plastic or..."

"NOBODY SAID THAT!"

In the end, Asuna nearly caused the Anti-Criminal Code to activate as she kicked my calf and corrected my memory.

"I said that it's romantic and pragmatic! I'm telling you, pragmatic means 'practical'!"

"Practical... The marriage in SAO?"

"That's right. In a certain sense, there's no room to hide as the item storage is shared."

"Storage...shared..."

That's the thing.

These words were stinging my chest, the origin of that little sharp pain.

Married players would have their item storage space unified company, and the quantity would be counted as for 2 people. While it's very convenient, it's very prone to marriage scams where rare items were stolen and the spouse ran away.

I had been wondering about this system all this time.

Overwhelmed by this overpowering anxiety, I asked again.

"Then...what happens to the storage when a couple gets divorced?"

"Eh...?"

It seemed like it was completely unexpected as Asuna widened her eyes. She tilted her head slightly and placed her fist that was about to hit me under her chin before saying,

"Erm well...I do remember there are a few options, like Auto-allocations, Item choosing or something like that...there are others, but I don't actually remember..."

"I want to know more about this. What should I do...oh yeah, Asuna, how about we try it?"

I didn't know if I could consider myself smart or lucky for not continuing.

«The Flash» let out a killing intent that was many times stronger than before, holding the scabbard of the named blade «Lambent Light» tightly in her left hand. She smiled and said,

"What do you want me to do with you?"

"...How about we...send a mail to Heathcliff and ask him?"

—Just one minute later, we got a mail in response. On it, the item storage division during a divorce was clearly stated. As expected of the man who was basically a living encyclopedia of the system.

Besides the Auto-value allocations and Item choosing Asuna mentioned just now, it seemed that there was an Auto-allocation by percentage. In other words, it even included the possibility of a divorce fee. This was a really pragmatic system.

I continued to listen to Asuna, who was reading the message, and continued to think.

Of course, these were options that can be chosen when both parties agree to a divorce. If they don't agree with the allocation, the system would not allow them to divorce. However, it's impossible for all examples of divorce in this world to be settled in such a rational manner. If it's such that one side had to divorce but the other party doesn't agree, there isn't any family arbiter or something like that in this world.

What answered this doubt was the last paragraph of words in Heathcliff's mail.

"...«On a side note, unconditional divorce can only happen if one party sets the item allocation ratio to zero percent for himself and 100 percent for the other party. In this example, once the divorce is set, any other items that can't be stored will all drop beside the user. Kirito-kun, if someone asks for an unconditional divorce out of you, I suggest you head to a single-person's room in an inn to hide for the time being»...that's what it's written."

Asuna, who finished reading the mail, gave a vague expression as she closed the window.

I subconsciously stared at that face and continued to mutter a certain part of that message.

0 for oneself, 100 for the other party. 0 for oneself...100 for the other party...

"Ahh...!"

What was a sting that felt out of place as it stung my chest suddenly became a sharp pain.

A small little prick suddenly increased in size. My heart started to turn anxiety into doubt, which then turned into surprise thanks to belief, and finally materialized into fear.

"Ah...ahhh...!!"

I shouted as I kicked the chair down, standing up and grabbing Asuna, who was in front of me, on the shoulders. «The Flash», who was so shocked that she cringed back, let out a cry that was different from before.

"Wait...what, what is it...don't tell me you thought of something here..."

I didn't have time to think about the meaning behind these words and could only let out a moaning-like voice,

"100 for oneself and 0 for the other party. There's only one way to make this form of divorce."

"...Eh...? Wha, what did you say...?"

I grabbed onto those slender shoulders tightly and pulled that petite face over to me before whispering in her ear,

"By death. The moment the marriage partner dies, the storage will revert back to its original size. Whatever items that can't be stored will drop. That means...that means..."

My trembling throat swallowed saliva, and I continued,

"...In other words, the moment the leader of the «Golden Apple» guild, Griselda, was killed by someone, the ring inside her storage wouldn't go to the criminal...it'd go to either her marriage partner, Grimlock, or materialize and drop on the ground as an object.

The hazel-colored eyes right in front of my eyes slowly blinked twice.

The doubtful expression on her face suddenly became a serious chill.

"The ring...wasn't snatched away...?"

Upon hearing this almost voiceless question, I couldn't immediately respond. I moved my hands away from Asuna and stood up, leaning my back on the window sill before whispering,

"No...it's not like that. You can still say it was taken away. Grimlock, he took away the ring that existed in his storage. He wasn't the culprit behind this illusionary 'inside area incident', but the culprit behind the 'ring incident'."

The rapier dropped down from Asuna's left hand, letting out a heavy metallic sound as it landed on the ground.

"...I was still feeling strange about this just 30 minutes ago... I say, Caynz-san, Yolko-san, those two weapons you two have...the spiked short spear and dagger, where did you get them from?"

On hearing me ask, Yolko exchanged looks with her partner, and answered,

"...To carry out our 'fake inside area PK' plan, it was necessary for us to have a continuous pierce damage type weapon. We visited many weaponsmith-sans, but couldn't find these kinds of unique weapons...if we ordered them, the weapons would have the name of the creator on it, and

once someone asked the person who made the weapons, he would immediately know the ones who ordered it, us, the victims."

"In this situation, we could only contact someone who hasn't been seen since the guild got disbanded...the husband of the leader, Grimlock-san. We explained to him our plan and requested him to make the necessary piercing weapons. We didn't know where he was, but the friend list still had his name on..."

Caynz continued on with the explanation and finally mentioned this name. I gathered my concentration on my ears and paid attention.

"Grimlock-san, he didn't actually approve of this. On the message he replied us, he just wrote that he hoped that she is rested in peace. But after we continued requesting him, he finally made the two, no, three weapons for us, and the day the weapons were sent to us just happened to be 3 days before Kains-san died."

From these words, I could tell that Yolko and Caynz viewed Grimlock as the victim when his wife was murdered.

I took a long breath and forced out words from my mouth that would bring about a great shock to both of them.

"...Unfortunately, the reason why Grimlock was against your plan wasn't because of Griselda-san. The exaggeration of this 'inside area PK' would bring about a lot of attention, and may end up with somebody discovering the truth. That's because, when it's not a divorce, but death that removes the linked storage...what will happen to the things inside?"

"Eh...?"

It seemed that Yolko didn't quite understand the meaning behind this sentence as she tilted her head slightly.

It's not unreasonable though. No matter how affectionate couples were in Aincrad, it's really rare for people to take the next step that was marriage, and there would be fewer people who'd divorce. Also, it's extremely rare that the reason was because one side died. Let alone me, even Asuna believed that the ring drop definitely landed in the killer's hand the moment Griselda-san was killed.

"Listen... Griselda-san's storage also belonged to Grimlock. Even if Griselda-san was killed, it's impossible for the ring to be taken away,

because the moment she died, it would be transferred over to Grimlock. Schmitt...you said you got a monetary reward for assisting in this plan, right?"

On hearing my question, the hulking figure sitting on the ground cross-legged nodded blankly.

"If he was able to prepare so much money, it seemed that the ring was really sold. The only one who could do this is Grimlock, who got the ring. He also knew that Schmitt was the accomplice in that plan, so that meant..."

"It was Grimlock...? That guy, he was the one who sent that memo...and sent Griselda out of the area and killed her?"

Schmitt groaned with a hoarse voice. I pondered for a while and denied this.

"No, he didn't do this directly. If Griselda, who was sleeping inside the inn, was moved out of the area, she may have woken up out of a sudden, and it would be troublesome if his face was seen. I guess the real murderer was a red who was requested to do this job. But even if that's the case, it still doesn't reduce the weight of Grimlock's crime..."

"..."

Schmitt didn't say anything as he merely looked up at the sky blankly.

This devastated expression appeared on Yolko and Caynz's faces as well. A few seconds later, Yolko shook her wavy dark purple hair, getting more agitated in the meantime.

"How is it possible...such a thing, you're lying! Those two were always together...Grimlock-san was always following her from behind...and also...that's right, if he was the real culprit, why did he assist us in our plan!? If he wouldn't help us, we wouldn't be able to do anything, and the 'ring incident' wouldn't see the light of day, right?"

"Did you two describe the entire plan to Grimlock?"

On hearing my sudden question, Yolko shut her mouth tightly, and gave a slight nod.

"...Then, he should have known what would happen if the plan succeeded. In other words, the final scene would be such that Schmitt, who was filled

with guilt, would come over to Griselda-san's grave to confess his sins and get questioned by Yolko-san and Caynz-san. In that case, he could think of a plan to bury the 'ring incident' into complete darkness. The accomplice, Schmitt, and the ones who wanted to know the truth, Yolko-san and Caynz-san. He just needed..to shut you three up."

"...I see. So...so that's why, those three..."

I glanced at Schmitt, who looked completely confounded as he said these words, and nodded with a depressed feeling.

"That's the case. The reason why the top three of the «Laughing Coffin» appeared was because Grimlock leaked the information to them. A DDA executive-level prey is here at this place without any allies...I guessed there was a contact link the moment he requested them to kill Griselda-san."

"...How is this..."

Yolko, who lost all her strength in her knees, collapsed onto the ground, and Caynz used his right arm to support her. However, that extremely pale face of his could be clearly seen even under the moonlight.

Yolko grabbed Caynz's shoulder and asked with a very lifeless voice,

"Grimlock-san...wanted to kill us...? But...why...? And...why did he kill his spouse just to get the ring...?"

"I can't deduce the motive behind this, but he, who never left the guild base to prove his alibi during that 'ring incident', probably won't just sit back and watch. Besides, this was a chance to deal with the three of you and bury two incidents in one go. So...for the details, just ask him personally."

The moment I just said this, my ears heard two sets of footsteps coming from the west slope of the hills.

The first thing that entered my eyes was the red and white knight uniform that was still radiant looking in this night scene. Obviously, that was Asuna «The Flash», wielding a rapier with a silver blade that looked extremely clear. As far as I know, this is the thinnest and most elegant looking blade in Aincrad, and also the most savage weapon that could pierce through all sorts of defenses.

A man was walking here as well, seemingly being forced to by the sharp tip of the rapier and the sharp stare of the user.

The very tall and thin figure was wearing very long-edged leather clothing and a hat with a very large edge. The face that was hidden under the shadows had something that would reflect moonlight from time to time, probably glasses. The overall impression he gave was that he was more of a hitman in a Hong Kong movie than a craftsman. Of course, that may be because I already had a biased impression beforehand.

The colors of both their cursors are green. I was already prepared to let Asuna become an orange player to prevent that guy from running away — of course, if that had happened, I would have definitely helped her perform whichever task was necessary to revert to her original alignment — so after seeing this, I couldn't help but heave a sigh of relief, but I immediately tensed up again and stared at this man walking up the hill.

Under the silver-framed spectacles was a face that looked gentle, no matter how one looked at it. The eyes that were long, narrow and looking somewhat droopy, looked rather kind as well. But the slightly small black pupils deep inside the glasses did have a certain kind of existence that could summon my cautiousness.

The man stopped three meters in front of me, first looking at Schmitt, then Yolko, Caynz and finally, the grave that was covered with moss before saying,

"Well...it's been a long time, everyone."

A few seconds later, Yolko finally answered back in a calm and deep tone,

"Grimlock...san. You...you, are you really..."

The one who killed Griselda, took the ring, and planned to eliminate the three of us here to cover up this incident?

Even though it wasn't stated, everyone understood from this question. As for this question, this man — the sub-leader of the ex-«Golden Apple», the blacksmith Grimlock didn't answer immediately.

He watched Asuna sheath her blade behind him and moved towards me before smiling, and said,

"...That's a misunderstanding. I just felt that I have a need to understand the outcome of this situation, which was why I came here. The reason why I obediently listened to that terrifying onee-san here is just to clear this misunderstanding."

——Ohh, he's denying it? I was really shocked inside. There's no actual proof to show that he leaked the information to PoH, but he can't deny about the system settings in the ring incident.

"YOU'RE LYING!"

Asuna immediately shouted back.

"Weren't you hiding amongst the bushes just now? If I didn't use the Reveal technique, you wouldn't have stepped out."

"Of course it couldn't be helped. I'm just an ordinary blacksmith, and as you can see, I don't have a single weapon on me at all. Why must I be told off by you so thoroughly for not appearing in front of some orange players?"

He answered calmly and reluctantly opened his arms with the leather gloves on.

Schmitt, Caynz and Yolko couldn't say anything as they just continued to listen to Grimlock defending himself. They were probably still in disbelief that their ex-sub-leader requested savage red players to kill them. They never thought of that and were probably unwilling to believe this. It's not weird for them to be like this.

I reached my left hand out to stop Asuna, who looked like she still wanted to say something, and finally said,

"Nice to meet you for the first time, Grimlock-san. I'm Kirito...just an outsider —— but it's true that we can't link your appearance here with the attack by «Laughing Coffin» as we have no evidence to prove these two cases. Even if we ask them, they probably wouldn't testify."

In fact, if Grimlock's friend list could be visualized and we checked the friends' messaging, there should be a player's name that accepted requests for «Laughing Coffin», but unfortunately, I don't know which name it was.

However, even if we left aside the attempted murder on Schmitt and company, there shouldn't be any excuses for the 'ring incident'. I believed this was the case, and continued,

"But last autumn, the 'ring incident' that caused the «Golden Apple» guild to disband...definitely has something to do with you. No, you should be the mastermind behind this. No matter who killed Griselda, the ring definitely

landed in your hands since you had a shared storage with her. You actually hid that fact, secretly sold that ring and handed half of the money over to Schmitt. This is something that can't be done by anyone other than the culprit, and there's only one reason why you're involved in this 'inside area incident'...you wanted to shut the mouths of those people involved and bury the past into the darkness, am I right?"

After I said that, a heavy silence descended on this hill of wilderness. The blue moonlight that was shining down from somewhere showed an obvious grim on Grimlock's face.

Soon, his lips curled strangely, and a voice that felt like it could cause the temperature to drop rang.

"I see. Such an interesting theory, Mr. Detective-kun...but unfortunately, there's a loophole in this reasoning."

"What?!"

I instinctively asked back. Grimlock glanced at me and used the right hand covered with the black glove to press his hat down.

"It's true that I shared the same storage with Griselda, so when she was killed, all the items that were stored inside her storage should come to me...this reasoning is right. However..."

A sharp stare came at me from the round lens reflecting the moonlight, and the tall and thin craftsman continued on in a monotonous tone.

"What if that ring wasn't kept inside the storage? In other words, what if it was materialized as an object and equipped on Griselda's finger...?"

"Ahh..."

Asuna let out a slight sound.

I, who was stumped by this unexpected question, could only let out such a similar empty voice. It's true that in this incident had many aspects that I didn't consider as well.

A player with equipment materialized as objects would definitely drop these equipment whether they were killed by monsters or other players, without exception. If Griselda was equipped with that ring, it wouldn't be transferred over to Grimlock's storage, but land in the killer's hand. This kind of reasoning is valid as well.

Did he realize that the tide has changed? Grimlock's lips curled up slightly, but that expression soon vanished. The blacksmith used his right hand to hold his forehead up and shook his head sadly.

"...Griselda was a speed-type swordsman. It's not unlikely for her to try out the high agility boost of the ring before she sold it, right? Listen up, when she was killed, everything she had did indeed come to me, but the ring wasn't there. That's how it is, Mr. Detective."

I subconsciously gritted my teeth. I tried to find a way to refute Grimlock's claim, but if I wanted to prove that Griselda was equipped with a ring or not, I'll probably need the criminal who actually killed her — probably some member of Laughing Coffin.

Upon seeing me remain speechless, Grimlock raised his hat slightly, looked at the other four people around, and bowed curtly.

"Then, I'll take my leave. It's a pity that you weren't able to find out the mastermind behind Griselda's murder, but even Schmitt's remorse alone would be enough to let her soul be at peace."

As we faced the back of the craftsman who pulled his hat down and turned around neatly——

It was as if a certain strong feeling was hidden in her serenity as Yolko simply said,

"Please wait...no, hold it right there, Grimlock."

The man who stopped turned his face slightly. The seemingly gentle eyes under the glasses suddenly gave an annoyed look.

"Is there something else? If it's just a baseless accusation out of emotions, that can't be considered. To me, this place is sacred ground."

Grimlock said this with an arrogant and fluid tone, and Yolko stepped forward.

Is she about to do something? She looked at the white hands that were raised to her chest, and then again looked forward. Those deep blue eyes were giving a glow of strength I had never seen till now.

"Grimlock, you just said that the leader equipped the ring, so it wasn't transferred to you, but taken away by the killer. But...that's impossible."

"...How? What proof do you have?"

Yolko watched Grimlock turn around slowly, and said with a harsher tone,

"When we got that ring drop, the guild members were all discussing about what to do, remember? Caynz, Schmitt, and I were opposed to selling the ring because we thought we should increase the strength of the guild. At that moment, Caynz really wanted to use it for himself, but said that he wanted to let the leader use it — the strongest swordsman in the «Golden Apple» was the leader, so it was best for her to use it."

Right beside Yolko, Caynz showed an awkward expression. But Yolko didn't mind at all as she continued to say with action.

"As for those words, I could still remember every single word the leader said. That person smiled as she said this — in SAO, one hand can only be equipped with one ring. My right hand is equipped with the seal of the guild leader, and...the marriage ring on my left hand can't be removed, so I can't use it. DID YOU HEAR THAT!? IT'S IMPOSSIBLE FOR HER TO TAKE OFF EITHER OF THESE TWO RINGS AND TRY THE ABILITY OF THIS RARE RING, IMPOSSIBLE!"

The moment the sharp words rang, everyone present, including me, gasped.

It's true that on the main menu equip figure, there are one each on both the left and right hands. If both of them were taken up, it's impossible to equip a new ring. However——

This reasoning was still too weak.

It's like my thoughts were heard as Grimlock said softly.

"I thought you wanted to say something. 'Impossible'? If you really want to say this, how about you say this? ——I, who's married to Griselda, would never hurt or kill her. What you just said was a baseless accusation."

"No."

Yolko responded with a very soft voice. I held my breath to watch this petite female player, and she slowly shook her head violently.

"No, that's not it. I have proof...the killer who killed the leader felt that the items that were dropped were worthless and left them at the scene. Luckily, a player who knew the leader's name found these items and sent

the leftover items over to the guild home. That's why we used this place...used this tombstone as the grave. At that time, we put her sword at this tombstone, and let it disappear as the durability wore out. Bu...but that's not all. I even buried something...something she left behind that I never mentioned before."

After saying that, Yolko turn around and knelt down beside the small tombstone and started digging with her hand. As everyone watched silently, Yolko finally stood up and handed the object over for everyone to see. It was a glossy silver box that shone under the moonlight.

"Ah...«Eternal Storage Trinket»...!"

It was just like what Asuna said. What Yolko took out was a storage box that only a master-class craftsman could make to preserve the durability of an item. It was a cuboid that was 10cm in size, so it couldn't store large items. However, it can store a few things that were the size of accessories. Even when placed in the wilderness, the durability will never drop, and the items wouldn't disappear on their own.

Yolko reached out her left hand and opened the lid of the silver box.

What lay on the white silk were two glowing rings.

Yolko first took out one of them—a larger silver ring. At the flat surface of the ring, there was a mark of an apple on it.

"This is the thing the leader always equipped on the middle finger of her right hand, the seal of the «Golden Apple». I kept the same thing, too, so you can tell once you compare them."

After putting it back, she took out another one — a long and thin ring that glowed golden.

"And this — is the wedding ring she would always wear on the left ring finger, you know, Grimlock! Your name is clearly engraved on it, too!...These two rings were at the same place — **THAT'S THE UNSHAKEABLE PROOF THAT THE LEADER WAS WEARING THEM EVEN AS SHE WAS TAKEN OUT OF THE AREA AND KILLED! ISN'T IT!? IF NOT, TRY ARGUING BACK!!**"

At the end, she was screaming hysterically in tears.

A large number of tears flowed down Yolko's cheeks, and she reached her hand with the golden ring out for Grimlock to see.

At this moment, nobody spoke up. Caynz, Schmitt, Asuna and I could only watch both of them in their confrontation with our eyes widened.

The tall and thin craftsman's lips were still curled as he remained there for more than 10 seconds. Finally, the lips trembled slightly before opening up.

"That ring...I think it was during the funeral when you asked me, Yolko, whether I wanted to take Griselda's wedding ring. I answered that we should let it disappear naturally with the sword. If at that moment...I said I wanted to take it away..."

Grimlock lowered his head deeply and buried his face inside the hat, collapsing onto the ground as if the strings controlling his tall body had snapped.

Yolko placed the golden ring back into the box, closed the lid and held the box tightly before looking up at the sky with her twisted teary face, saying with a voice that had lost its sharpness.

"...Why...just why, Grimlock. Why, did you really want to snatch the ring to exchange it for money, and kill the leader...your own wife, for the sake of that?"

"...Money? Did you say money?"

As he continued to kneel, Grimlock said with a hoarse voice, and then started laughing.

He raised his left hand, summoned the menu window, and after a short time of operating, what appeared as an object was a leather bag that's just slightly big. Grimlock grabbed it and threw it onto the ground. Amidst the heavy sound, there are some clear metallic sounds in them. From this, I could deduce that the bag had a large amount of money.

"That's half of the money earned when it was sold. Not a single coin has left it."

"Eh...?"

Grimlock looked up at the puzzled and frowning Yolko, and then looked over at us and said in a hoarse voice,

"It's not because of money. I...I had to kill her, while she was still my wife."

The round glasses glanced at the moss-riddled tombstone for an instant and quickly turned back, and the craftsman continued his words.

"Griselda, Grimlock. The Gri at the beginning isn't a coincidence. She and I, we used the same names in the net games we played before SAO. And if the system allowed it, we were always husband and wife. That's because...she was my wife in the real world."

I was thoroughly shocked deep inside as my mouth opened slightly. Asuna gasped as well as Yolko and the rest looked extremely surprised.

"To me, she's an ideal wife without a flaw. It's like she was designed as a wife who would follow the husband, who was extremely cute and obedient and never quarreled. It's just that...when we were trapped in this world together...she changed..." Grimlock shook his face that was almost covered by the hat and sighed,

"The one who was scared and trembling when we entered this forced death game was me. What sort of talent was hidden in her...whether it was the battle ability or decision making, Griselda...no, «Yuuko» far exceeded me. Also, that's not it. Later, she went against my opposition, creating a guild and enlisting members before starting to train. She...as compared to the real world, was filled with even more life...looking extremely fulfilled...as I stood beside her and watched her, even I had to admit that the Yuuko I loved had disappeared. Even if we cleared the game and returned to the real world, the quiet and obedient Yuuko would never come back.

The shoulders of the longcoat that had buttons in front trembled slightly. Was he mocking himself or feeling the pain of his own loss? I couldn't tell. That soft voice continued,

"...Can you understand what I was scared of? If I returned to the real world...and if Yuuko raised the proposal that we're to divorce...I would never be able to endure the shame. Then...while I was still her husband in this world where killing is legal, I wanted to seal Yuuko in my memories. This wish of mine...I suppose no one can blame me, right...?"

The slow and horrifying confession ended, and during this time, no one was able to say anything.

And what I heard was the hoarse voice coming out from my throat.

"Shame...shame? Because your own wife stopped listening to you...you killed her just for this reason? She trained herself and her friends so that

we can all be released from SAO...and hoped to join the clearing group one day, and you...killed her...for such a reason..."

I used my left wrist to hold down the right hand that was about to reach for the sword on my back.

Grimlock slowly lifted his face, the bottom of the glasses reflecting a soft light, and muttered at me,

"Such a reason? Of course not. That's an ample reason. One day, you'll understand, Mr. Detective. When you get love and are about to lose it."

"No, you're the one in the wrong, Grimlock!"

The one who argued back wasn't me, but Asuna.

The exceptionally pretty face gave an expression even I didn't know of, and the rapier user said calmly,

"What you harbored for Griselda wasn't love, just possessiveness. If you loved her, take off the glove on your left hand. You probably threw the same ring away which Griselda didn't take off even as she was killed."

Grimlock's shoulders jerked slightly, and just like me, his right hand was holding onto his left.

However, his hand didn't do anything else. The craftsman remained silent and didn't take off the leather glove.

The one who broke the silence again was Schmitt, who didn't talk up til now.

"...Kirito, can you leave this guy's punishment to us? Of course, we won't lynch him, but we'll definitely make him atone for his sins."

This calm voice didn't have any sense of the absolute terror it had several minutes ago.

I looked up at the muscular guy whose armor let out some sounds and nodded slightly.

"I got it. I'll leave it to you then."

Schmitt nodded wordlessly and grabbed Grimlock's right hand to pull him up. After checking that the craftsman with his head lowered wouldn't run away, he simply said, "Sorry to trouble you," and left the hill.

Yolko and Caynz, who buried that silver box back in, walked towards us, bowed deeply and exchanged looks with us. Yolko then said,

"Asuna-san, Kirito-san. I'm really sorry...I don't know how to thank you two. Without you two, we would probably be killed here...and Grimlock's crime won't be revealed."

"No...luckily you managed to remember those two rings in the end. Nicely done. If you return back to the real world, you can be a prosecutor or lawyer."

On hearing this, Yolko smiled and shrugged.

"No...you two may not believe this, but at that moment, I seemed to have heard the leader's voice and remembered the rings."

"...I see..."

Both of them bowed again. Asuna and I then watched them walk down the hill, following Schmitt from behind.

Soon after, the 4 cursors all disappeared into the town. On the hill in the wilderness, there was only the blue moonlight and the steady night wind.

"...I say, Kirito-kun."

Suddenly, Asuna whispered softly.

"If you...if you get married with someone and found out something about her that you didn't know about, how will you think?"

"Eh?"

This question that I had never considered before caused me to be stunned. I had only lived for 15 years, and this delicate question of life is something I couldn't understand completely.

But after thinking about it, I finally said an answer that more or less lacked thought.

"I'll probably think that I'm lucky."

"Eh?"

"Tha...that's because if we're married, it means that both of us like the areas we can see, right? So if we find a new side after that, and if we still like each other...won't it be tw, twice the love?"

I know that it's really a stupid explanation, but Asuna merely frowned, tilted her head and smiled.

"I see. That's weird."

"We...weird..."

"Well, it's nothing much. Let's not talk about this...a lot of things have happened, and my stomach is grumbling. Let's go get something to eat."

"Tha, that's right. Then...that Algade's specialty that looks like okonomiyaki without the sauce..."

"Rejected."

As expected, Asuna refused it, and suddenly grabbed my shoulder from before.

Shocked, I turn to look behind, and what was in front of my eyes——

The umpteenth inexplicable scene ever since I got involved in this 'inside area incident' appeared in my eyes.

In Aincrad, all sorts of senses are digitalized data that can be indicated through process codes, so it's impossible for supernatural phenomenon to happen.

So is this a bug in the server I see? Or is it an illusion in my breath?

Not far away, on the north side of the hill, under the old trees gathered there, beside a moss-riddled tombstone standing there...was a translucent female player giving off a slightly golden light.

Her slender body has the bare minimum metallic armor. The long sword is tied at her waist, the shield is on her back, and her short-haired head has a serene and beautiful face. Her eyes has a strong glow that I know most players have.

The eyes of a clearer who wished to use the blade to end this death game.

This female player who's giving a serene smile watches Asuna and me wordlessly. However, after a while, she extends her right hand over to us to seemingly hand something over.

Asuna and I reached our right hands out, and as we felt the warmth, we clasped onto it tightly. This warmth entered our bodies, lighting the fire within our chest. We opened our mouths and said out the words the form within us.

"Your will...we'll definitely carry it on. One day, we'll definitely beat this game and release everyone for you to see."

"Un, definitely, so...please watch over us, Griselda-san."

Asuna's words rode through the night wind and reached the female swordsman. The transparent face showed a large smile——

And in that instant, nobody was there.

We put our hands down and remained spaced out over there for quite some time.

Soon after, Asuna clasped my hand tightly, smiling and saying,

"Let's go back. We have to work hard tomorrow."

"...Yeah. I want to clear that level by this week."

We then turned before walking down the hill, heading towards the main town.

(END)

(Alfheim, December 2025)

Part 1

"Onii-chan, look at this."

With that sound, Suguha handed me a thin tablet terminal. I looked at it sleepily.

I went to sleep like normal last night, but it seemed like I had a long dream. Maybe it was due to that, this morning at the breakfast table, I had to use strong coffee to forcefully turn my thinking gears that refused to move. However in this situation, a small warning lamp lit in part of my head, and I hesitated whether to accept the tablet or not.

Because about two weeks ago, in a similar situation and timing, when she handed me a hard copy, it was my secret misdeed—not exactly that serious, but Suguha silently collected evidence of my character conversion from flight type VRMMO «ALfheim Online» (ALO) to the gun battle VRMMO «Gun Gale Online» (GGO). 'Is this the same as that time, but what have I done recently', while thinking that, Suguha said with a bitter smile.

"I am not going to hang you, this time. Just look at it!"

I fearfully accepted the tablet that was held out again, and took a peek.

It displayed the same thing as the previous hard copy, a news story from the country's largest VRMMORPG information site «MMO Tomorrow». However, the page category was not GGO but ALO. When I looked at the first article screenshot, I saw not a player avatar but a landscape. So it was true, it wasn't a story of a certain Spriggan dressed in black.

Relieved, I read the headline of the article.

However right after, I suffered a different kind of shock, and raised my voice when I finished.

"Wh... Whattt!"

[The Strongest Legendary Weapon «Holy Sword Excaliber», Discovered At Last!].

It was written down on the article like that.

I forgot my previous fatigue and read the text as if devouring it, and a long moan escaped from my mouth.

"Uh—huh... they found it at last..."

"Well, I still think it took them a long time."

Opposite of me, Suguha spread blueberry jam on her toast, and responded with a pout.

«Holy Sword Excaliber».

It was the only weapon in ALO that is said to surpass «Demonic Sword Gram» which the Salamander general Eugene had. However for a long time, other than a small description and picture at the bottom of the weapon introduction section on the official game site, how to obtain it in the game was unknown.

—No, to be exact, there were only three players that knew, that's not right, four people. Suguha, Asuna, Yui, and me. We found it at the beginning of this year, in January 2025. Since it was now December 28th, the secret of Excaliber had been kept for nearly a full year.

"Ah... if it is like this, we should have challenged it again..."

While complaining, I shoved my spoon into the jar of homemade jam which Suguha gave me and scooped the purple jelly onto my toast. Then I spread some whipped butter, making a marbled design. Recently trying to control her calorie intake, Suguha discretely watched me prepare my toast and tried to endure while comparing the toast in her right hand, but her willpower's saving roll^[1] apparently failed, and without a word she pulled the butter jar toward herself.

Trying to show that she could at least control the amount, she carefully spread the butter sparingly. Suguha took a bite of that toast and corrected my misunderstanding.

"Keep reading, it has still only been found. It seems that no one has acquired it yet."

"What."

I who was going to take a big bite into my toast, stopped my hand and stared at the tablet on the table again. It was written in the article that the existence of Excaliber was confirmed, but there was nothing saying that somebody had gotten it. Thinking about it, if a player had acquired it, the article picture would be a screen shot of those guys proudly holding that golden sword.

"I see, don't scare me..."

I mumbled as I took a big bite of my toast this time, and let out a cry of relief. Seeing that, Suguha laughed at my impatience, took the milk carton and poured it into the glass in front of me.

Today is Sunday, December 28, 2025, 9:30AM. For both Suguha and me, it was the start of winter break, so we were having a slightly late breakfast. Mother seems to have some proofreading left to complete this year, so she flew out of the house earlier with a toast in her mouth. The e-books without the need for a printing office had both advantages and disadvantages.

Father, whose job took him to New York, was busy as usual, sent an e-mail saying that he was returning home on the 30th. When it was just Suguha and me at the table, our conversation naturally drifted toward ALO, as usual.

After finishing my first piece of toast, I spoke of my doubts as I spread my second toast with tuna this time.

"But, then how did they find it? Flight is impossible in Jötunheimr, but Excaliber is at a height where it can only be seen with flight."

A year ago, after departing from the Sylph capital and while aiming for the central city Alne, Suguha (Leafa) and I (Kirito) finally saw the world tree. But we were immediately swallowed by a giant worm monster, and passed through its digestive tract, then dropped into the Underworld, Jötunheimr.

We fell into a field populated with giant evil-god class monsters which we could not possibly defeat, and as we tried to reach the stairs to above ground, we came across a very strange scene. A humanoid type evil-god with four arms was attacking an evil-god that looked like a jellyfish with a long nose and the head of an elephant.

Leafa had shouted "Help the one being bullied!", and I who had drawn the four armed one into a nearby lake, and when it reached the water, the jellyfish evil-god won. Far from attacking us, that fellow who Leafa named

«Tonkii» took us on its back, and carried us to the center of Jötunheimr. Tonkii, who underwent an «emergence»^[2] from a pupa, flew while carrying Leafa and me to a walkway leading through the canopy to above ground—in the middle of that, we saw it. A huge inverted pyramid dungeon wrapped in the roots of the World Tree hung from the canopy, sealed in a sparkling crystal at the very bottom was a golden sword.

Suguha seemed to have relived that memory along with me, and with upturned eyes, said with a smile.

"Onii-chan, at that time you were really at a loss. Whether to return to the ground or jump off Tonkii and try to go through the dungeon and get Excaliber."

"W... Well, I hesitated... But I dare say it, people who don't hesitate there, I won't recognize them as real net gamers!"

"Those words are not very cool."

Suguha made that assessment while smiling, and looked down seemingly lost in thought. Apparently she was not at a loss on what to spread on her second piece of toast though, for she reached for the tube of tuna spread and whispered.

"...Tonkii will only come if Onii-chan or I call. ...I have not heard of anyone finding another way to fly in Jötunheimr. Does this mean, someone has saved another elephant jellyfish evil-god like us and succeeded in obtaining the quest flag..."

"It might be like that... That disgusting... no, unique form evil-god being saved by a whimsical... no, philanthropist person other than Sugu, I am surprised they exist."

"He isn't disgusting! He is cute!"

While glaring at me, my supposed-to-be 16 year old sister declared that and continued speaking.

"But, with this, I think it is just a matter of time before someone successfully breaks through the dungeon and gets the sword. It was not discovered until today because it is hard to understand the conditions for the flag activation, but a year has passed and there was the update that introduced Sword Skills, so the degree of difficulty of the dungeon itself should have decreased."

"You... are right..."

Taking a sip of my milk, I nodded.

It was January this year that we found Excaliber. After that, the administration of ALO was transferred from RECTO Progress to its current venture company, then there was the addition of the Floating Castle Aincrad, causing a huge change in the game. When things finally calmed down in June, Leafa, Asuna, Yui, and I got on Tonkii's back again and challenged the dungeon to obtain the Holy Sword Excaliber.

And failed miserably. That aerial inverted pyramid dungeon was full of the boss type of giant four-armed humanoid evil-gods that had bullied Tonkii, they were so strong as to make us want to cry out "No way—!". The three of us plus one had gone ahead of time, not to challenge it but to scout it out. At that time we determined that it was impossible, so we swore we would "Challenge it again after we became stronger."—But.

The first ten levels of Aincrad were opened when it was put into the game, with up to the 20th level opened up until September, so our plans were focused there. We sometimes went to Jötunheimr to collect materials, and incidentally called Tonkii to play with it, but about Excaliber, since no one else was going after it—or more like no one has found it, a year had passed by like that.

However, in MMORPGs, it is impossible for items to never be found. The details were still unclear, but since the location of the sword appeared on the news site like that at last, a lot of players would be rushing to Jötunheimr, some of which might have already entered the aerial dungeon.

"...What are you going to do, Onii-chan?"

Suguha asked, lifting her glass of milk with both hands after she finished off her second toast.

Against that, I cleared my throat to respond.

"Sugu, pursuing rare items isn't the only pleasures of VRMMOs."

"...Yeah, that's true. Even if the weapon specs are strong..."

"However, I think we must answer the feelings of Tonkii, who showed us the sword. As for that fellow, surely he hopes we will break through the dungeon. Because to us, Tonkii is a friend, right."

"...Earlier, you said he was disgusting..."

I asked my younger sister with damp eyes, and the biggest possible smile.

"So, Sugu, are you free today?"

"...Well, my club is on break."

Good! I punched my right fist into my left palm. And changing the gears of my thoughts, I started talking about the capture strategy really quickly.

"The maximum number of people Tonkii could reliably carry is seven. So, with Sugu and me, Asuna, Klein, Silica, and Lis... that leaves one more person. Agil is busy with his shop... Chrysheight is unreliable, Recon is at the Sylph capital..."

"...How about try to invite Sinon-san."

"That's it!"

I snapped my fingers and immediately took out my cell phone, scrolling through the phone book.

Earlier this month, I was involved in a certain case in GGO - «Gun Gale Online», and converted Kirito, I met a female player named Sinon there. After solving the case, Sinon became friends with Lis and Asuna, who invited her to make a character in ALO.

But since it is a new character that has only been used for two weeks since it was made, for an all skill system like ALO, the average of many of her numerical stats was still low. But with Sinon's senses, she should be able to stand tall even in very difficult dungeons.

Opposite me, who was sending e-mails at maximum speed, Suguha quickly stacked the plates and glasses, and took them to the kitchen. It might be just my imagination, but her footsteps had a bounce to them. Perhaps, no matter what she says, she was planning it to turn out like this when she showed me the news.

Diving into the other world with my companions, challenging a difficult and thrilling mission. Something more fun than this would be hard to find.

Once I had finished sending an invitation to five people, including Sinon, via e-mail, I did a short run to the kitchen to help Suguha.

Even though it's a Sunday, to so easily gather a seven people party in the year-end morning, it must be the inviter's natural virtue—no, it must be the result of the «Holy Sword Excaliber» strongly calling out to their gamer souls. Compared to half a year ago when Asuna, Leafa, Yui, and I challenged it, this time we have more people and our individual stats are far higher.

Our meeting place was at Yggdrasil City's main street, where a signboard stating «Lisbeth's Arms Shop» was. The Leprechaun storekeeper was sharpening everyone's weapons in order on a whetstone wheel. Before a large-scale quest, it was common sense to revive the durability of our equipment to the max.

To that Salamander katana user, Klein, who was sitting on the bench next the wall with legs crossed, with the excuse of «cheering up», and tilting a wine bottle back in the morning—of course, even so not one milliliter of alcohol entered his real body—the Cait Sith Beastmaster Silica, who had the fluffy blue dragon on her head, asked him.

"Klein-san, are you already on New Year vacation?"

"As of yesterday. There are no loads at this time even if I want to work. Our president is proud of our super white company having a week of vacation before and after year-end!"

Even looking like that, Klein is a proper member-of-society employee that works at a small import company. He always speaks ill of his company President, but he was taken good care of during his two years of imprisonment in SAO, and after Klein returned alive, he was immediately able to return to work, so it must be a good company. Klein also seems to feel indebted to him, and recently developed a long distance presentation system using a mobile camera and «the seed» package. For me who helped a lot in modifying that camera, only treating me to all-you-can-eat roasted meat once was a bit hard to swallow, but I will call it even for him helping me with today's quest—.

Leaning against the wall while I thought, the object of my thought, Klein, looked at me and said.

"Hey Kirito, if we succeed today in getting «Holy Sword Excaliber», next time you can help me get «Spirit Katana Kagutsuchi»."

"What... that dungeon is damn hot..."

"If you say that then Jötunheimr we are going to today is damn cold!"

While we were having our low-level argument, a subdued voice came from the left.

"Ah, then I want that «Light Bow Shekhinah»."

I looked at the person who stopped talking. Leaning on the wall with her back same as me, standing with arms crossed, from short light blue hair, grew sharp triangle shaped ears, was a female Cait Sith player. If Silica was a friendly munchkin type, then this was a cool Siamese cat—no, she would be a ferocious wildcat.

"You only made your character two weeks ago, and you already desire a legendary weapon?"

In response to my question, the wildcat's slim long tail moved in a waving motion and answered.

"The bow Lis made is wonderfully constructed, but I would like it to have a little more range if possible..."

At that moment, from the workbench deep in her workshop, Lisbeth who was just then changing the string on that bow turned around and replied with a forced smile.

"You there, the bows in this world, are a weapon with more range than a spear but less range than magic! Aiming at more than 100 meters away is just not normal!"

In contrast, the wildcat just shrugged, and put on an unruffled smile.

"What I would really like is double that range."

At her home base in GGO, she was an over 2000 meters ultra long-range sniper, knowing that, I could not help but make a stiff smile. If she really got that bow, in duels without area range limit, before you can bring a sword into range, you would be shot with arrows like a hedgehog and that would be the END.

The water color haired wildcat—is a new friend, Sinon that came to ALO two weeks ago, with just one day of practice, she fully mastered the hard to use bow. Speaking of archers in ALO, it can be mobile Sylphs with short bows, or Gnomes who excel in endurance and strength using a heavy ballista as a mobile battery, she totally ignored those theories and instead

focused on range with a longbow, choosing to be a Cait Sith, the race with the best eyesight out of the nine for her build. Thinking of letting her do what she wants at the beginning and other things, but seeing her arrows hitting in longer range than fire-attribute magic, and killing monsters before they can approach her, I ended up kneeling to her inside my heart.

The arrow from bows in this world, under normal distance, has system assist like magic attacks for target hit support, beyond that distance, wind and gravity influence will make the arrow miss the target. However, GGO used a common engine to simulate «the effects of wind and gravity», so it was like Sinon had been training on manual correction for years. It's the same as when I went to GGO and used «view detection» skill that is not in the system, this means the similarities for VRMMO made using The Seed, still has things in it that I did not think of—.

While I was thinking about various things, the workshop door to my right was flung open forcefully.

"I am back!" "Sorry for the wait."

The owners of those voices were Leafa and Asuna, who had gone potion shopping. It seems they did not put the objects into their item slots, but carried them back from the market in the baskets they carried, they dumped various small bottles and nuts onto the table in the center of the room.

A little fairy flew from Asuna's shoulder—she was a Navigation Pixie named Yui, landed on my head and sat down. My Avatar, the Spriggan «Kirito», had long pointed hair, at Yui's request now I have my old hairstyle. The reason was it was «hard to sit on».

On my head, Yui started speaking in a voice like a bell.

"I gathered some information while we were shopping, there was not any player or party that have reached that aerial dungeon, papa."

"Oh... Then, why is «Excaliber»'s location known?"

"Apparently, a different quest than the Tonkii one we discovered was found. That quest's reward seems to be the NPC showing Excaliber's location."

Hearing Yui's words, Asuna, who was organizing the potions, turned around with her Undine's only long blue hair waving, made a small frown and nodded.

"And apparently, it wasn't a peaceful quest either. Rather than errand or guard type, it was a slaughter type. Now, thanks to that, it is a brutal fight to claim re-pop monsters^[3] in Jötunheimr."

"...That surely won't be calm..."

I twisted my lips, too.

Slaughter type, as the name indicates, «Defeat over xx number of xx type monster» or «Gather xx number of drop items from xx type monster», that kind of quest. Naturally, because it is a quest that requires a party to keep hunting a certain type of monster in a certain area, when other parties on the same quest is in the same small area, the scramble for the best re-pops, that is the re-spawned monsters inevitably leads to PvP^[4] battles.

"But, isn't that strange?"

Klein who finished his bottle of brandy, wiped his lips and opened his mouth.

"«Holy Sword Excaliber» is sealed in the deepest chamber in an aerial dungeon guarded by powerful evil-gods right? What does it mean to have a quest reward from an NPC reveal it?"

"Now that you say it, it does seem so."

Silica too, while hugging Pina who came down from her head to her chest, tilted her head.

"If it's a reward for transportation to the dungeon, that's understandable..."

"—Well, we'll understand once we get there, I'm sure."

Next to me, the comment from Sinon was as cool as ever, and Lisbeth cried out from deep in her workshop just after that.

"Great! All weapons, full recovery!"

"Thanks for your hard work!!"

Everyone sang a chorus in appreciation. Then took their shining like new, loving sword, katana, bow and other weapons back and equipped them.

Next, from the table, Asuna divided the potions into seven portions by inherent command capability, we took them and put them in the belt pouch at our waists. Then stored the items we couldn't carry in our item slots.

Taking a quick glance at the real world time display in the lower right hand corner of my view, I saw it was just 11:00 AM. We would take a lunch and restroom break at some time, but probably can make it to the first safety zone in the aerial dungeon.

Looking around, I saw that preparations were complete by all seven + one + one dragon, and cleared my throat to get everyone's attention.

"Everyone, thank you for coming today in response to my urgent call! I'll repay you for this one day, in spirit! Well then—let's do our best!"

Ooo! It might have been my imagination, but there seemed to be slightly wry smiles mixed into that chorus. Turning around and opening the door of the workshop, I aimed for the secret tunnel which led from Alne that is below Yggdrasil City to the underworld, Jötunheimr, and started my boots forward.

Part 2

The narrow alley, which wasn't shown on the map of Alne's back streets, split left and right, the stairs went up and down until it reached a door at the garden of a private house we passed previously.

It was an unremarkable rounded wooden door, it actually lead people to think of it as a decorative object, which could not be opened. Leafa put a small copper key from her pouch into the key hole, and turned it, causing a clear Clink unlocking sound. The key was added to our storage without my knowledge when Tonkii carried us through the tunnel for the first time. So it could be said that it was impossible to open the door from the Alne side.

I grabbed the iron hoops and pulled, the wooden door slid open in the middle to the left and right, revealing the interior descending stairs. Once the line of all seven people went past, and Klein, who was at the end of the line, closed the door, it automatically locked itself again.

"Uwahn.....What are these steps for?"

Lisbeth, who came here for the first time, couldn't help but exclaim loudly. The descending stairs which was the floor of the tunnel had a diameter of around two meters, it was illuminated by the small lamps on the wall,

emitting a pallid phosphorescent light, and the length of the stairs seemed to continue into the limit of resolution.

"Hmm, it is like part of the Aincrad's labyrinth tower zone."

The answer came from Asuna who was at the start of the line and had already stepped down the stairs; Lis, Silica, and Klein's faces showed surprise at the same time. I made a wry smile, then stressed my gratitude toward this tunnel.

"Well, if you think about going to Jötunheimr using the normal route, first you have to find the stairway dungeon, which is located on the unknown location on the Alne plateau, advance inside while fighting the monsters, and lastly, defeat the boss guarding the place. One party would still require at least two hours to do that, but this route only takes five minutes! If I was Leafa, I'd start a business here collecting toll of a thousand Yrd per entry."

"Hey, Onii-chan, exiting here without Tonkii will drop you to an unavoidable death at the large underground hollow in the middle of Jötunheimr though."

Leafa said while making a tired face, she was always too straight.

At the very center of the large underground world, Jötunheimr was a big bottomless hole with a diameter of around 1.5 kilometers, it had been given names like «Deep Central Hollow» or «Great Void». The holy sword Excaliber was sealed within the air maze inside the upside down pyramid, which protruded from the canopy right above that void. The exit of the stairs we were running down was close to the air maze, and was also located high up in the sky over the void, jumping over will certainly result in going down that bottomless pit and to our deaths, returning to the save point above the ground with no question asked.

Ahem, I cleared my throat and said with a strict face.

"Well, for that reason, let's take each step with appreciation and without complaining, gentlemen."

"It wasn't you who made this though"

Sinon who was walking in front of me immediately responded. Still as cool and straight as ever, I should express the gratitude for this retort properly.



"Thanks for the retort."

Saying thanks, and at the same time grabbing hold of the light blue tail swaying in front of me to substitute a hand shake.

"Fugyaa!!"

Suddenly, the wildcat archer made a loud scream and jumped. She turned around, and skillfully ran back up, but I pulled my face back with ease before both her claws could make a scratch.

The triangular ears and tail unique to the Cait Sith race were of course organs human don't have, however, they could sense the feeling using an unknown mechanism. Being grabbed hard by a player who wasn't aware of the fact would cause a «super weird feeling»——Silica's explanation——for that reason, the reaction was always very amusing.

"You, the next time you do this I'll shoot a fire arrow straight up your nostril!"

Hmph! In front of Sinon who turned around quickly; Leafa, Lis, Silica, Asuna, with Yui sitting on her shoulder all shook their heads in a flawlessly synchronized motion. Klein who was behind them groaned in admiration, "You just don't know fear, huh."

Just under the expected five minutes, as the party was passing through the outer crust of Alfheim via the tunnel stairs, a dim white light could be seen at the end of the tunnel.

At the same time, the coldness of the virtual atmosphere increased with each step. The sparkling ice crystals started glittering in front of their faces.

After a few seconds, we were finally out of the crust, our vision caught sight of the bird's eye view of Jötunheimr. The stairs which were carved into the thick tree root continued on in midair for about fifteen more meters before it ended.

"Uu.....waah.....!!"

"Wow....."

Sinon and Silica, the two cats who saw Jötunheimr for the first time raised their voices at the same time. Even the small dragon Pina on Silica's head flapped its wings energetically.

Spread below the eyes and covered in the massive amount of snow and ice was the beautiful and harsh world of eternal night. Illumination came from the huge ice crystals protruding from the canopy surrounding us, which refracted a small amount of light from the ground above. Other light sources were from the yellow-green or purple-blue burning bonfires at the castle and fortress of the evil-god tribes scattered here and there on the surface. The height from the ground to the center of the canopy could reach one kilometer, the countless numbers of evil-gods on the field couldn't be seen from this height. And right below was the huge bottomless pit, inhaling all light, the «Void».

Returning the gaze from below back to the front, it was a terrific scene difficult to describe with words.

The countless roots crept about—the roots of the world tree stood tall above Alfheim ground—it seemed like they were supporting the thin blue ice block protruding sharply from the canopy, which was our destination, the «Aerial Dungeon», that was shaped like an inverted pyramid. Its base was three hundred meters on each side, and its height was about the same. The myriad of rooms and passages which had been dug inside the ice could be seen from this distance, as well as the huge shadow hovering there.

Finally, my vision moved to the sharp tip at the bottom of the inverted pyramid.

Even with the increased night vision of the Spriggan race's special trait, it was still hard to see the shining gold light which blinked briefly. At the depth of that shining light resided the strongest incentive, ALO's strongest legendary class weapon, the «Holy Sword Excaliber», was sealed there.

After the general status confirmation had been completed, Asuna then held her right hand up and started reciting the smooth spell words. At that moment, the body of all members were wrapped in a thin blue light, and a small icon lit up under the HP gauge at the upper left of their vision. Immediately, the chill went away as if we wore a first class down jacket. It was the freeze resistance boost supporting spell.

"Okay."

Leafa nodded after hearing Asuna voice, her right fingers were applied to her lips and she whistled a high pitch.

Several seconds later, Kwooo–.....n, a distant cry mixed with the sound of the wind slowly approached. Contrasting the dark void background, a white shade could be seen ascending.

From the side of the body, it looked like a spatulated fish, or a flat rice paddle, with four pairs, eight fins resembling white wings stretched out. Hanging from the lower side of the body were numerous ivy-like tentacles. Its head had three black eyes on each of the three sides, and an extended long nose. The evil-god which «emergence» from the elephant-jellyfish into this strange yet beautiful form, was Tonkii.

"Tonkii-saaaaan!"

From Asuna's shoulder, Yui called out with all her voice, the strange evil-god cried Oo–n once again. It ascended in a spiral movement after flapping its strong wings. With its shape becoming larger, the four new comers retraced their steps back up the stairs.

"It's alright, this guy is herbivorous."

After I said that, Leafa turned around and grinned.

"But, the other day I gave him fish I brought from above ground, he ate them all in one bite though."

".....H-Heh."

Klein and the others took another step back, but the narrow stairs had no more room for them to retreat. Once Tonkii was right in front of us, it stretched its long nose from its face which still resembled an elephant's, and with its bushy haired tip —— stroked Klein's standing hair.

"Ubyrho!?"

I pushed the back of Katana user who made an odd sound without mercy.

"Hurry, go ride on its back."

"E...Even you say that, I, not riding American cars and flying elephants was the last will of my grandfather....."

"The other day at the Dicey Café, your grandfather just gave me handmade dried persimmons, didn't he? It was delicious too, please bring me more next time!"

I pushed his back again after saying that, Klein fearfully stepped on Tonkii's shoulder and moved to its flat back. Subsequently was Sinon, who had no fear as usual, followed by the animal lover Silica who seemed to have included Tonkii into her target. Lisbeth said in an unexpected girly voice "Yokkorasho!" while following, then Leafa and Asuna who weren't first timers jumped on, lastly me, lightly scratching the base of Tonkii's nose before jumping onto the back of the evil-god class monster, which had a total length of more than ten meters.

"Alright, Tonkii, please bring us to the dungeon entrance!"

Leafa who sat right behind its neck shouted, Tonkii raised its long nose and cried again, then slowly flapped its eight wings to move forward.

For me, this was the fifth time riding on the back of «Tonkii», the flight type evil-god, including when we were just playing around . Even if I didn't mention it, I thought about it every time. It was——

".....Hey, what happens if we fall from here?"

That, was what I thought, frankly asked by Lisbeth who sat right behind me.

That's right. It was the principle of Jötunheimr that all the fairy tribes couldn't fly here, and damage would be applied upon falling from a high altitude. Depending on the skill value, damage would occur when falling from over ten meters, and falling from more than thirty meters would certainly lead to instant death.

However, Tonkii's current flight altitude was in the region of a thousand meters. There was no need to think about what would happen if we fell from this height. Of course there were some safety measures —— like grabbing the tentacles below its belly —— but I'd rather not have to do so.

While everyone seemed to have the similar concern in their minds; only Leafa, the «Speed Holic» who sat in front, along with Yui who moved to sit on her head, and Pina who was embraced by Silica, were feeling comfortable.

The one who answered Lis' question was Asuna who sat stickily beside her. With a somewhat stiff expression, she looked at me and smiled, then said,

"There was a person who climbed the pillar connecting to the next layer in the old Aincrad and fell down, I'm sure that person would experiment falling from here in the future too."

".....Falling from this height, aren't cats more suitable for that?"

The two felines immediately made a serious look and shook their heads repeatedly.

During the exchange, Tonkii was still flapping its four pairs of wings, slowly gliding through the air. Up ahead was the terrace entrance to the aerial dungeon made out of ice, the entrance was located at the top side of the inverted pyramid. Hopefully it'll be a safe ride until the end——

I secretly wished that. At that moment,

Without any warning, Tonkii folded all its wings into sharp angles and broke into a rapid dive.

"Uwaaaaah!?"

Was the loud yell by the two men.

"Kyaaaaa!"

The high scream by the girls group.

"Yaho————!"

That was Leafa.

Both my hands desperately grabbed at the hair, which grew thickly on its wide back, to withstand the rushing wind pressure. The diving angle seemed to be almost vertical, the ground below progressively approaching. But why did it suddenly do this? Every ride up till now was always a slow patrol course between the tree root stairs and the ice terrace.

Was it tired of being used as a taxi? Or did the fish Leafa gave it before weigh heavily in its stomach?

While thinking about things which wouldn't be beneficial to my health, the details of the ground covered in ice and snow was getting much higher precision. It seemed Tonkii was aiming for the southern border of the huge pit, the «Void». Yes, it was the place where Leafa and I once fought with the Undine raid party trying to kill Tonkii.

Immediately after that, the sudden decelerating G caused our bodies to bend over and stick to the evil-god's back. Tonkii spread out its folded wings, applying the brakes to the nose dive. At least it looked like it didn't want to litter the ground with its luggage. I lifted up my body while exhaling in relief.

I looked downwards from Tonkii's back once it started cruising horizontally again, the altitude was already at about fifty meters. Now the state of the ground was clearly visible, like a high detailed aviation photo. Dead trees with sharp icicles hanging. Frozen rivers and lakes. then——

".....Ah.....!?"

Leafa who sat on Tonkii's head raised her voice sharply and stretched her body. She then pointed to a spot on the ground as she squeezed out her voice that sounded almost like a scream.

"O..Onii-chan, look there!!"

Hearing that, the other five and I gazed to the front left, in the direction Leafa pointed her finger.

Suddenly a dazzling flash effect burst up, and shot into my eyes which was accustomed to the dim light. Then, a bass sound followed after a slight delay. Based on this, it was a large scale attack spell, no doubt about it.

Tonkii made a sad Krrru—n cry. The reason for the cry was found shortly,

The attack was focused on the manjū-like body sitting over the long tentacles, with the long nose and big ears of an elephant, it was a large jellyfish monster. The same type as Tonkii before undergoing «emergence», no doubt about it.

Then, the attack was from a large scale raid party with more than thirty members. With colorful hair color and the varying body sizes, it seemed to be a force of mixed races. If looking at just that, it could be said that it was just the normal «Evil-god hunt party». But what Leafa saw which we didn't, was the fact that it was not only the players that attacked the elephant-jellyfish.

With the height of about six or seven times that of the Gnome's, while having the form of a human, it had four arms and three faces lined up vertically. Its skin color was like pallid steel, its dull red eyes had the reminiscence of burning coal.

It was the same as the humanoid evil-god monster which tried to kill Tonkii the first time we met. Each of its arms held a steel-like crude sword, the blunt blades repeatedly slammed into the elephant-jellyfish's back. Its hard shell cracked and the bodily fluid gushed out while the players continued firing spells, arrows, and sword skills into those cracks.

"What's.....going on there? Did someone tame that humanoid evil-god?"

Asuna whispered as she panted. Silica shook her head vigorously and answered,

"That's impossible! The tame success rate on evil-god class monsters, even with maximum skill and full equipment boosts is still 0.00%!"

"That means....."

Klein stroked his bristling red hair while groaning.

"That was, how to say it.....«Hitch a ride» is the term? Attacking the elephant-jellyfish along with those attacks from the four arms and taking credit of the final blow at the end....."

"But I wonder about the hate control in that situation."

Sinon commented calmly despite her eyebrows drawing tightly together. Certainly it was as Sinon said, for the evil-god's action patterns, it would be no surprise if it turned its attention to the players if they fired a spell or skill nearby, even if they did not cause any damage.

Unable to understand the reason, we bit our lips while looking at the scene, finally the large body of the elephant-jellyfish evil-god trembled and fell down on its side to the snowy field. At that point, the iron swords and the large spells rushed on——

"Hyrrrrrrruuuu....."

The elephant-jellyfish screamed in agony before its body turned into a large amount of polygon pieces and scattered away.

Kwoooo..... Tonkii made a sad sound again. Leafa, who sat on its head, was trembling, and on her head, Yui also faced downward with a sad expression.

Unable to find any words to comfort Leafa and Yui, my glance remained fixed on the raid party down below.

Suddenly, my eyes widened in surprise.

The four armed giant that was not under tame, incitement, or dazed state, raised its foot and roared in victory; the several dozen players also lightly made a guts pose, then both sides started to move to claim the new target.

"W..Why don't they fight each other!?"

A hoarse voice leaked from Asuna who was beside me, she then seemed to notice something and lifted her face,

"Ah.....there, look!"

She pointed at the hill on the far right side. The battle effect also flickered violently from there. I focused my eyes and could see the large group of players, this time with the assistance of two humanoid evil-gods. It looked like they were hunting the alligator type evil-god with many legs.

"What the heck is going on here.....?"

To Klein's confused question, Lisbeth murmured in a low voice,

".....Maybe it was what Asuna said above just now, the new slaughter type quest in Jötunheimr.....? The assistance from the humanoid evil-gods to exterminate the animal type evil-gods.....it seemed....."

".....!"

Upon hearing that, all of them inhaled at the same time.

It was probably so. If it was during the quest, it was possible to have a joint force with specific mobs. But what was the reason for the quest reward being related to the «Holy Sword Excaliber»? That sword was sealed inside the humanoid evil-god's stronghold, which means, one couldn't get it without defeating those humanoids.....

Thinking up to this point, I looked up due to the reflection from the big ice pyramid above.

However, that was not where the source of light was. Because at the furthest end of Tonkii's back, where no one sat, particles of light appeared without a sound, and condensed —— to produce a human shape.

The long garment in the shape of robe. The wavy blond hair flowing from the back to the feet. The lady with elegance and a transcendental beautiful face.

But a word surged out of my mouth, and at the same time, Klein's, who had quickly turned around, which wasn't supposed to be said to a woman.

"Hu....."

".....ge!"

However, that could be forgivable. The height of the lady was, based on our estimation, more than three meters.

Fortunately, the first words from the mysterious huge lady to us sounded like she didn't appear to be hurt by our words, her serene expression remained as she opened her lips. The flowing voice, unlike that of a player's, was tinged with a solemn effect.

"I am «Queen of the Lake» Urðr."^[5]

The huge blond onee-san continued talking to us.

"Ye fairies who bonded with our kin."

Kin? I twisted my neck with doubt in my mind. It seemed those words were directed toward us, who were hovering on Tonkii, Is this lady the friend of those animal type evil-gods inhabited in Jötunheimr?, I thought that, but.....

At that point I finally realized the huge lady who called herself «Queen of the Lake» in front of me was 100% not human. The skirt of her long blond hair was like tapered, divided, and undulated tentacles; The limbs inside the robe that could be seen were covered by pearly scales. Similar to Tonkii, the strange form of large creature which chose to borrow human appearance — But even so, I was still impressed.

"To you, my two sisters and I have but one request. Please save this country from the invasion of the «Frost Giant Tribe»."

What I thought while listening to the story was Firstly, this giant lady is «What»?

The color cursor didn't come out even when focusing on the vision, and it was certainly not the figure from a player's enchanting spell. Was it a harmless event NPC? Was it a trap set by the aggressive quest Mob? Or was it an avatar controlled by a human GM? I couldn't make a conclusion.

Then unexpectedly, I felt a modest weight on my left shoulder. And at the same time, in a cute whisper from Yui.

"Papa, that person is an NPC. But it's a little strange. It seems not to talk based on the fixed response routine like NPC usually do. Its core program is connected to the language engine module."

".....So, it's a kind of AI then?"

"Yes, Papa."

While thinking about what Yui said, I continued to listen to the lady's story.

NPC — the «Queen of the Lake Urðr» turned her pearly sparkling right hand toward the vast underground world and said,

"This «Jötunheimr» was once like your «Alfheim», with the blessings from the world tree Yggdrasil, covered in the beautiful water and greenery. We, the «Rock Giant Tribe» and those beast kin lived together in harmony."

At the same time as those words, the surrounding scenery covered in snow and ice soundlessly shook and dimmed. Appearing as if it was a layer of illusion, was the scene in Urðr's story. The world filled with plants, flower fields, and pure water. It could be said it was far richer than the Gnome or Salamander territories up above.

Even more surprising, behind Queen Urðr where the bottomless pit «Great Void» was, in this other world it wasn't there. Instead, there was a lake filled with sparkling transparent water. The thickly huddled roots of the world tree from the canopy in this world reached the lake without spreading in other directions.

On the summit of the roots over the water surface existed houses made from logs, no, a town was probably more suitable. The scene was similar to the central capital Alne up on the surface.

Urðr lowered her right hand, and the illusory scene disappeared. The chilled ice world of Jötunheimr returned, she looked indifferent, but I might have imagined seeing her with sadness filled eyes, as she continued to speak.

"——In addition, on Jötunheimr's lower plane, the country of ice «Niflheimr» existed. The land was ruled by the king of frost giant tribe «Þrym»,^[6] he once transformed into a wolf and did infiltrate this country, then stole the Excaliber, «The sword which cut all of steel and tree»,

forged by the god of blacksmith Völundr^[7] and threw it into «Urðr's Spring» at the center of this world. The sword severed the thick roots of the world tree, and in that instant, Jötunheimr no longer received the blessings from Yggdrasil."

This time Urðr lifted her left hand, and the illusory screen regenerated. We could only wordlessly watch the overwhelming scene.

The roots of the world tree which expanded over the surface of the huge lake — «Urðr's Spring», shook and floated over the surface, then shrunk toward to canopy. The town which was built atop the roots collapsed all at once.

At the same time, all the leaves of the tree fell, the grass withered, and the light faded. The rivers were frozen, the frost condensed, as a snowstorm raged. The huge amount of water in «Urðr's Spring» froze momentarily and became the large mass of ice, which was wrapped and pulled up by the roots of the world tree as they retracted back into the sky. The large number of lake inhabiting creatures snapped off the ice mass and fell down. Among them was the elephant-jellyfish type, like the old Tonkii.

The roots of the world tree ascended and reached Jötunheimr's canopy or Alfheim's crust before long, and half of the huge ice mass it carried pierced into the canopy. That ice mass was no doubt, set up and honored as the «Inverted Ice Pyramid» in the current Jötunheimr. At the bottom-most of the ice mass, a sharp edged icicle, a glittering golden light could be seen. It was from the sword thrown by the frost giant king Þrym, the sword which severed the connection between the world tree and Jötunheimr, it was, without a doubt, Excaliber.

When all of the water was lost, the once beautiful lake turned to a huge bottomless pit.

Urðr lowered her left hand, causing the illusory screen to disappear. However, this time it didn't make a large change to the scenery. The most change was the mass of ice in the sky, which had undergone restructuring into the linear dungeon. The existence of Excaliber at the bottom of that pyramid had also been confirmed by Leafa and me with our own eyes too.

"King Þrym's subordinates, the «Frost Giant Tribe» is preparing a big plan to invade Jötunheimr from Niflheimr, many of us, the «Rock Giant Tribe», had been captured and imprisoned in the various fortresses and castles they had built. The king built the castle «Þrymheimr» in the large mass of

ice once called «Urðr's Spring», and ruled over this land from that castle. No longer having the power we once had, my two younger sisters and I had to escape to the bottom of a certain frozen spring."

Urðr's eyelids were half-downcast, she resumed the tale which was probably nearing the end. We had partly forgotten that she was an NPC, and the tale was just an in-game quest, wordlessly listening.

"The frost giant tribe wasn't satisfied with just that, but also wants to massacre every one of my kin, the beasts living on this land. That way, my power will completely vanish, and it would allow Þrymheimr to float up to the plane above, Alfheim."

"W-What! If it happens, Alne will be destroyed!"

Klein, who seemed to be deeply immersed into the story, yelled. The non-fixed response routine and partial AI, Queen Urðr nodded at Klein's words and said,

"King Þrym plans to enclose Alfheim in ice and snow, then continue attacking until reaching the top of the world tree Yggdrasil, where the «Golden Apple» exists, his objective is to obtain that fruit."

.....Something like that exists up there? I thought for a moment, then suddenly realized, near the summit of the world tree, there was an impossibly strong eagle, a named mob, guarding an inaccessible area. It could be possible that the golden apple existed inside.

Urðr gazed at the ground, her eyebrows still bated with sadness.

"Being irritated by being unable to easily destroy my kin, Þrym and the frost giant generals started to use the power of ye fairies. Inviting them to hunt my kin, using Excaliber as a reward. However, it is not possible for Þrym to bestow the sword to others. Once Þrymheimr loses Excaliber, the blessings from Yggdrasil will return to this land, and that castle will melt."

"Eh.....then, then, Excaliber as the reward is all lie!? Is it possible to have a quest like that!?"

The queen generously nodded at Lisbeth's wild voice and said,

"When the god of blacksmith Völundr forged the sword, he discarded the one in which he slipped when striking with the hammer, which looks just like Excaliber, but it is actually the «Fake Sword Caliburn». Þrym is

probably going to give that fake sword as the reward, while it is strong enough, it doesn't possess the true power of the real one."

"S-Sly.....is it alright for the king to do this.....?"

Leafa murmured in confusion. Urðr nodded again and exhaled deeply.

"That cunning is Prym's strongest weapon. But he was too impatient in destroying my kin, and committed one mistake. In order to cooperate with the fairy warriors they lured in using the fake reward, almost all of the giant subordinates are down on the ground. So, the defense in the castle is now thin."

Arriving at this point, I finally realized the future of this quest — no, this «queen's request».

The queen of the lake Urðr stretched forth her large arm toward «Prymheimr» in the air and said,

"Ye fairies, please invade Prymheimr and remove Excaliber from its «Plinth»."

Part 3

".....Somehow, that was an amazing tale....."

Was the first thing Asuna murmured after «Queen of the Lake Urðr» melted into shiny water droplets and disappeared. Tonkii ascended again — this time gradually.

Her words were followed by Sinon's, who seemed to have recovered her thoughts, talking as she moved her light blue tail,

"This is...a normal quest.....right? But isn't this assignment, the story too great? Once all the beast type evil-gods had been annihilated, the frost giants will invade the surface next, did she say this?"

".....Yes, she did."

I nodded, then twisted my neck while folding my arms.

"But, would the management's side go that far without any updates or event notices? For any other MMOs, any «Boss Invasion Event» would normally come with at least one week of advance notice though....."

Everyone nodded in agreement.

Then, Yui who sat on my left shoulder flew to hover in the middle of us and said in a volume everyone could hear,

"Well, This might be just a guess, but....."

With a slight pause as if to think about what to say, she then continued,

"——This «ALfheim Online» has one major difference from other standard VRMMOs from «The Seed». That is, the game operation isn't based on the feature reduced version of the «Cardinal System», but uses the same full specs version as the one used in the old «Sword Art Online»."

That was certainly correct. It wasn't a story I wanted to remember, but ALO was created by a man whom was possessed by greed, in order to use some of the old SAO players in his illegal research, he copied the whole original SAO server. So the autonomous system operating the world «Cardinal» in ALO has the same capability as the one used in SAO, of course.

Yui looked around at our attentive listening faces, then added,

"The original Cardinal System has a few functions which had been cut out in the shrunk version. One of them is the «Automatic Quest Generation Function». It will collect legends and folklore of the world through the network, and continue to generate infinite amount of quests using proper names and story patterns."

"W-What?"

Klein's stubbly jaw dropped abruptly as he groaned.

"That means, that disastrous quest from pacific we did in Aincrad was created by system-sama?"

".....I can recall too many of them. At the time we reached the 75th floor, just those listed in the quest database of the information shop exceeded ten thousand....."

At one time, in order to earn the management fund, the guild had to seriously take on many of those quests, the KoB sub-leader said as she shook her head. Silica who was next to her stared to the distance and muttered,

"Also, I could hear this sometimes-myō. It was probably on the 30th floor, the slaughter quest to kill the ogres wearing strange masks and using chainsaws, but no matter how many times they were killed, the next week the quest would pop up on the bulletin board again. What legend did it come from though....."

For quests like those, I too have a lot in my memories, but at this rate, until we reach the ice pyramid, it'd be a meeting to complain about old Aincrad. So, in order to steer the topic back, I cleared my throat and said,

"That said, Yui, is this quest also created by the Cardinal System?"

"Judging from the behavior of the NPC earlier, the probability is high. It might be possible that the automatic quest generator that stopped until now had been restarted from the management's side."

Yui continued with a difficult face after she nodded to my question.

"If the story keeps progressing like this, the situation will end up in the worst state. That ice dungeon floats up to Alfheim above, Alne collapses, the evil-god class monsters popping up on the surface..... No, even worse....."

Her lips closed for a moment — the AI girl then continued with a frightened expression,

".....According to the data in my archive, as ALO has included parts of the Norse mythology in the quest, it'd certainly lead to the so-called «The Last War». Not only do the frost giant tribe from Jötunheimr and Niflheimr invade, but those from the lower plane «Muspellsheimr», the flame giant tribe would also appear, and burn down the world tree..... That is....."

".....«Ragnarök»."

Suguha — Leafa, who loves legends and mythology, also has those kind of books in her room, said quietly. Immediately her emerald pupils widened and she shouted "But!".

"Something like that..... The game system shouldn't be able to completely destroy its own managed maps though.....!"

What she said made sense. But Yui gently shook her head.

".....The original Cardinal System has the authority to completely destroy the map. Because, the old Cardinal's final duty was to destroy the floating castle Aincrad after all."

"....."

This time we sank into complete silence, unable to say anything.

The next person who opened their mouth was Sinon, whom up till now was mostly listening.

"——If that «Ragnarök» really happened and it wasn't the management side's intention, isn't it possible to do a roll back?"

"O.....Oh, that's it, that's right."

Klein nodded repeatedly. Simply speaking, «Roll back» was used to overwrite the current situation with backup data. It was mainly done when players gained unexpected benefits due to bugs or programming oversights. In this case, if Alfheim had been turned into scorched earth, although it wouldn't affect individual player's exp or items, nobody would want the whole place to be like Salamander territory's «Burnt Land».

However, for some reason, this time Yui didn't nod in agreement.

"It would be possible if the management's side did backup all the data manually and kept the physical media in a separated location..... however, if they used Cardinal's automatic backup function, depending on the configuration, it could be possible that the roll back would only affect player data and not include the fields."

"....."

Again, all members went silent for two seconds. Klein suddenly shouted "Oh yeah!" then opened the system window. But just after that, he held his head and said "No good!".

".....What did you do?"

Lisbeth asked while turning to the katana user's miserable face.

"Well, calling a GM, just wanting to confirm if they know about this situation . But it's off hours for human support now....."

"End of the year, Sunday, in the morning too....."

I sighed, shook my head, then looked into the sky.

The huge ice pyramid was quite close now. It's three hundred meters wide on each side, if it pierced up through Alne it would certainly cause a great clamor. While half of its population had migrated to «Yggdrasil City» at the top of the tree, Alne was still the raiding base for the advanced dungeons on Alne plateau, the central trading market for all races, along with its familiar crowded weekend nights, it was the town full of my profound memories.

".....When it comes down to this, there's nothing but to do it, Onii-chan."

Leafa held a big medallion hung on her right hand up high.

It was given by «Queen of the Lake Urðr», a cleanly cut large jewel was inlaid in it. But now, more than sixty percent of the cut surface had sunk into pitch black darkness, not reflecting any light.

When the jewel was dyed in total darkness, it meant all of the beast type evil-gods had been completely annihilated without a single one left, and Urðr would be stripped of all her power. At that time, «Frost Giant King Prym»'s Alfheim invasion would begin.

".....That's right. Initially we gathered today to raid that castle and get «Excaliber» anyway. It's in our favor when the defense is currently weakened too."

I nodded, then opened the system window and operated the equipment figure.

Long swords appeared hanging crossed on my back, one was humbly made by Lisbeth's equipment shop, and the other was dropped from the 15th floor boss we defeated the other day in the new Aincrad.

Looking at my nostalgic back carrying two swords, Klein smiled from ear to ear and yelled,

"Alright! This is this year's final big quest! I've decided, let's get on the tomorrow's front page of MMO Tomorrow!"

The target was somewhat realistic, so this time Lisbeth didn't make a wry smile. "Oo—!" Everyone said in chorus, Tonkii under our feet moved its wings violently and cried "Krrr—n!".

The aviation type evil-god increased its ascending speed and crossed the pyramid at once, its big body hovered along the entrance at the top of the pyramid. Leafa, who was the last person, jumped to the ice terrace, stroked Tonkii's big ear and said,

"Just wait, Tonkii. We'll surely take your country back!"

She then turned about and pulled the long sword hanging loosely on her waist. At the same time, we took our weapons out too, in front of the big twin ice gates which stood tall in front of us.

Just as Urðr had said, there was no first guardian here like always, and the doors began to open. Exchanging glances with each other, we quickly set up a formation, with the front row being Leafa, Klein, and I; Lis and Silica were in the middle, while on the back row were Asuna and Sinon, we kicked the ice floor to begin running, and broke into the huge castle «Prymheimr».

In ALO, the upper limit of a party size was, strangely, seven people. The reason why it didn't use six or eight like most other titles, until now, has never been officially told. That way, the maximum size of a raid party was 7x7 or forty nine people. The currency obtained from the monsters would automatically be distributed by the system function, as manual distribution would be very troublesome to calculate.

Well, from the seven people slot, if filled with only close friends, five would be pretty much fixed. With Asuna, Lis, Silica, Leafa, and I. All were high school students, furthermore, four went to the same school, and two even lived together, so the timing was easy to set.

The sixth and seventh slots could still be smoothly filled up, by the company employee Klein, coffee shop and bar master Agil, the senior bureaucrat Chrysheight, or Leafa's real life friend Recon. Recon was also a high school student, he was part of the olden day's «Yggdrasil Capturing Operation» and had been recruited by the Sylph lord Sakuya to help with scouting duty. Currently he was a permanent member of the Lord manor staff in Swilvane town, I had played together with him for a brief period of time when Aincrad was over the sky of the Sylph territory.

This time, I was glad the slot was filled with the bow user I met in GGO — Sinon, however, there was still one unresolved problem for the party.

It was the lack of a mage. The only permanent member who had increased their magic skill was Undine Asuna, and as half was spent on her thin

sword skills, her master leveled skills were only for support and recovery purposes. Leafa was also a spell fencer but her spells were only for enfeebling during combat. Then Silica had a little magic but her main focus was on support duty; Lis, of course, had spent more than half of her skills on smithing; Agil also had more than thirty percent on trading skills; then Klein and I had all our skill points focused on physical close combat, the so-called «Brain muscle» type. There was no one capable of casting attack spells.

Occasionally, when Recon, the Sylph dagger wielder with a mysterious build of very high dark magic; or Chrysheight whose freezing attack magic was at the lord class; joined as the seventh slot, the flexibility in combat was much wider. So lacking the fire power of a mage was really our weak point.

But that couldn't be helped. Because most of us had migrated from SAO — a world where magic didn't exist. My one-handed straight sword, Asuna's thin sword, Lis' war hammer, Silica's dagger, Klein's katana, Agil's axe, then Leafa's long sword and Sinon's bow, were all not just mere weapons, but could be exaggerated into considering them as proof of our existence. At this point, discarding our weapons to raise our magic skill was already impossible. Even knowing it wasn't efficient, but all we could do was to trust our battle style that focused on physical attack, we managed to come this far with it anyway.

Still, we encountered dangerous situations occasionally.

"This is bad, Onii-chan, that gold one has high physical resistance."

Leafa at my left side whispered quickly.

Before I could say anything after nodding to Leafa, «That gold one» brandished its extraordinary huge battle axe up high.

"Shock wave attack in two seconds! one, zero!"

Yui who sat on my head exuded a loud voice despite her small body. Following the countdown, the five people from the front and middle rows split up to the left and right, creating a gap. The blade of the axe swung roaring down, and created a shock wave, cut in a straight line, which passed through the gap and hit the wall on the other side violently.

It had already been twenty minutes since we broke into the ice castle «Þrymheimr».

It was just as «Queen of the Lake Urðr» said, the number of the enemies inside the dungeon was quite thin. The encounter rate of the small fry mob was almost zero. Half of the floor's sub-bosses were also absent. However, the boss defending the hall in front of the stairs to the lower floor was there as expected, it was time to show our overwhelming attack power to the boss which once forced Asuna, Leafa, and I to say "No way—!".

Nevertheless, we somehow defeated the one-eyed boss on the first floor without twisting our hands, ran through the second floor, and managed to reach the boss room again, however——

What awaited for us there was the giant humanoid with the head of a bull, a large evil-god of the so-called «Minotaur» type. Moreover, there were two of them, the one on the right had its whole body in pitch black, the body of the other one on the left glittered with gold, the weapons they both used were battle axes with blades as large as dining tables.

As the first floor's Cyclops boss was defeated easily by the icicle in the center of the room, even without magic attacks, I first thought that we were fine, but there was one problem. Apparently, the black one resisted magic, while the gold one would be physical resistant, and thinking that it was fine resulted in an unexpectedly high price to pay.

Then we should defeat the black quickly and after that, attack the gold with carefully set up battle tactics; however, the two bull heads, unexpectedly, seemed to be connected by strong bonds, when the black's HP decreased, the gold would ignore the hate and come to protect it. During that time, the black behind it would curl up its body, it seemed to be some form of meditation power that could recover its HP.

After they did that once, we concentrated our attacks on the gold while the black was meditating, but as it had high physical resistance, its HP barely decreased. And of course we had problem with our HP, even though we could avoid the instant death attacks, the ranged attack's splash damage was impossible to avoid; with the healing only by Asuna, it was obvious she wouldn't be able to support us for long.

"Kirito-kun, at this pace, my MP will only last for about one hundred and fifty seconds!"

I heard Asuna shout from behind me, so I held up my right hand sword in reply.

In such an endurance battle, if the healer's MP ran out, what awaited the party was total annihilation — in other words a «Wipe». If someone managed to survive, it was possible to collect and resurrect the Remain Lights one by one, but it would require a lot of time and effort. However, in case of a wipe, of course we would have to restart from the save point in Alne. But the problem was how much time we had left——

As if she could read my concerns, Leafa who was next to me whispered again.

"The medallion is more than seventy percent in darkness now, we won't have enough time if we «Death warp»."

"Understood."

Nodding, I deeply inhaled and enclosed it in my stomach.

If this was the old Aincrad, I'd issue a withdrawal without a second thought. In that world «Betting on the possibility» was not allowed. But now in ALO, it was no longer a Death Game. Even if the Cardinal System turned the entire Alfheim into a scorched field, it would affect only one thing, which was the «game enjoyment». So in this case, I had to believe in my companions strength.

"Everyone, when it comes down to this, there's only one thing we can do!"

Avoiding the gold Minotaur's axe swing and affirming the gauge of the black Minotaur recharging its HP in the back, I shouted,

"This is all-or-nothing, concentrate our attack using Sword Skills on the gold!"

«Sword Skill».

Just that, was the game system that distinguished the former SAO from the others.

In March of this year with the «Aincrad implementation update», the management team had introduced Sword Skills into ALO. However, there were some modifications, one of them was the «Additional damage property». The current high ranked Sword Skills no longer have only pure physical property, but are equipped with magical properties of earth, water,

fire, wind, darkness, or holy. Therefore, it would be able to pass through the gold Minotaur's high physical resistance.

Of course, there were risks involved. Most of the consecutive Sword Skills had a long stun duration after finishing the move. If we took a direct hit from those battle axes in that time period, the HP gauge would be completely reduced to zero. There was a case where the front and middle rows could be instantly eliminated from the horizontal ranged attack as well.

However, everyone understood those risks and nodded immediately.

"Oh yeah! That's what I'm waiting for!"

Klein, at the right wing, held his beloved katana high above his head. Jumping to my left was Leafa who also set up her long sword at her waist. At my back, Lis and Silica tightened their grip on their weapons in preparation.

"Silica, use «Foam» on the count of three! —Two, one, now!"

I instructed based on the gold's action, Silica then shouted,

"Pina, «Bubble Breath»!"

Normally, issuing a command to the pet didn't ensure one hundred percent success rate regardless of the taming mastery. But I have never seen Pina ignoring Silica's command before. This time too, the small dragon dancing in the air above Silica opened its mouth and released rainbow colored bubbles.

The bubbles slipped through the air and burst in front of the gold bull's nose which was preparing its big attack using its battle axe. The bull with weak magic resistance went under a confusion effect for just a second, and stopped its movement.

"Go!"

As a response to my shout — all the party member's weapons aside from Asuna's went into dazzling multi-colored light effects.

Why did the floating castle Aincrad's creator Kayaba Akihito create the system of «Unique Skills» with such deviated power?

Until now I still couldn't grasp the real reason behind it.

The skill «Holy Sword» that person possessed could be clear example. Being the leader of the strongest guild Knights of the Blood, the paladin who stood in front of many players with his absolutely unbreakable crossed shield, and those legends would be turned up-side down at the 95th floor, when that man would turn himself into the worst demon king of all RPG last bosses in existence.

In that moment, the «MMORPG with the main story driven by player's action» would be realized. An Incarnating Radius — realized world. In order to achieve his purpose of the world creation, it was necessary for him to continue being the absolutely strongest paladin. Even with «Holy Sword» and «Immortality properties», he also had to depend on the irregular power that was the «Over Assist».

But if just the unique skill such as the holy sword were sufficient, it would not be necessary to have an MMO where 'The Hero was the only one who could confront the demon king'. Of course, it would lead to a difference in the player's battle power, which wouldn't be appropriate based on the rules of fairness.

Yet, he still gave «Dual Blades» and probably a few other unique skills to the players.

Those abilities outside of rules resulted in the unequal distribution of the resources, that guy even understood that it could distort how the world would progress along his plan. In fact, during my duel with Heathcliff for Asuna's withdrawal from the guild, if I didn't have the «Dual Blades» skill, he could have won without having to use the Over Assist. Recalling that moment of irregularity caused me to realize Heathcliff's true identity on the 75th floor. By giving me the unique skill, his imagined world — his story had to end at just three-quarters of the way.

In ALO's world, in the rare moments that I held two swords, I always had a thought in a corner of my mind, Why?

At the same time, there was also a bit of guilt. Of course, I defeated Heathcliff on the 75th floor — It was a victory I didn't regret. If the game hadn't cleared at that point, the victims of the incident would certainly have increased even further. Among those might be people dear to me. Or perhaps, even myself.

However, I couldn't stop thinking about it. 'Was it alright like that?' and 'Mustn't we climb to the 100th floor and fight with the demon king Heathcliff

there?' No, not 'must'. It was what I wanted to do, it was just my egotism, the worst egotism. That was why I hesitated equipping two swords in Alfheim.

—However, there was no «Unique Skill» in this world. The new management team had verified the enormous number of sword skills and removed some suspicious conditional skills from the system — rumors said about ten skills were removed.

So I couldn't use the dual wielding sword skills such as «Double Circular» and «Starburst Stream» anymore. While I could reproduce its movement without System Assist to ninety-nine percent, and I had proven it against both human and monsters, however, it couldn't be used here. Because my self-made dual wielding skill version, although it could reproduce the technique's power, it didn't contain any magical attribute, so it was ineffective against the high physical resistance gold Minotaur.

However, «Using one handed sword skills while equipped with two swords» had one advantage — as Leafa said «A lead tipped shinai was like terribly cheating a hundred fold».

Being hit by the special move «Bubble Breath» from the little dragon Pina, the gold Minotaur was stunned for about a second, in front of it was me, Klein was on the right, Leafa on the left, and from both sides Lis and Silica were also there, we all charged in at the same time.

"U.....ooo!"

Everyone roared, then drew the highest leveled sword skills we learned. Klein's katana was wrapped with a rampaging flame, Leafa's long sword created a flashing gale, Silica's dagger had water spray moving around it, Lis' mace emitted a groaning lightning flash. In addition to that, from behind, the arrows glowing with its ice arrowhead flew in rapid succession, accurately piercing at the tip of the nose which seemed to be the bull's vital point.

At the same time, my right handed sword glowed in an orange light, and I assaulted it with all my power.

Five high-speed continuous thrusts then cut downward, upward, before another full force upward cut. The one-handed sword eight combo sword skill «Howling Octave». Its attributes were forty percent physical and sixty percent fire. Within the one-handed sword category, it was in a high tier.

So of course, the stun after the move — the skill delay was also long, however,

".....!!"

With a voiceless yell, my consciousness had detached from my right hand after releasing the attacks. The movement command output from my brain to the AmuSphere was to cut off everything for a moment. My next command was to start transmitting commands to the left hand.

The right hand was on the auto-pilot thanks to the System Assist, it went on with the final upward cut. And, parallel to it, my left hand moved, drawing the sword backward. The blade released bright blue lighting.

The right sword made a deep cut at the exposed abdomen of the bull headed humanoid. Originally, this would impose a delay, causing my avatar to become rigid. However, the parallel activation of the sword skill of the left sword had overwritten the delay. The slash drew a horizontal arc and cleaved at the bull's right abdomen.

It was not normal for my body, no, my left and right half of the brain to think of separate things at the same time. But here, my consciousness stopped its integration to the sword skill, leaving the right hand's skill to the System Assist, while concentrating on the left hand.

The sword causing the horizontal cut and buried in the enemy avatar rotated ninety-degrees. I then pushed down on the grip in my hand, the blade jumped up and dissected the enemy vertically from the belly. Once the blade exited, this time I slashed down from above. It was the three hit heavy attack, effective against large type monsters, «Savage Fulcrum». Fifty percent physical and fifty percent ice.

On the verge of finishing the attack from the left hand——

I switched the output from my brain once again.

This timing, if it were too late or too early, could cause the skill to misfire, and cause the avatar to become rigid. The window of error allowed was less than one-tenth of a second. I noticed this skill combination by chance around three months ago, and I wouldn't want to recall how much I have been practicing since then, but the success rate was still below fifty percent. With feeling and half praying, the sword in my right hand started to move.

"Ku.....oo!"

Mounted on a short fervor, the blade glowed in light blue. From the vertical cut without a backward motion, then up and down combination, followed by a full powered upper cut. A high speed four hit combo «Vertical Square»——

Up until this point, the total number of hits was already fifteen. Approaching the number of a high rank Dual Blades' skill. While it continued to be hit, the enemy would be under a delay so there was no need to think about the defense.

When Vertical Square started, the skill delay of my companions were already over.

"Zeeryaaaaa!"

It was obviously a war cry from Klein, as the second wave of concentrated attacks engulfed the gold Minotaur. The dungeon floor trembled, a large amount of the enemy's HP gauge was suddenly shaved off.

Just before the final upper slash, I challenged the fourth «Skill Connect» without any hesitation.



This didn't mean that any one-handed sword skill was suitable to lead in. The movement by the System Assist, and the movement of the non-attack arm, all needed to be in continuous motion to the next skill.

At the time the Vertical Square from my right hand unleashed, my left arm was folded toward the shoulder. From there, with just a slight twist of my body, the «pull the shoulder carrying the sword, the other hand moves forward» form was completed. The sword in my left hand was wrapped in a crimson light effect. The blade roared like a fighter jet and approached from behind, my arm shot out at an ultra high-speed. A heavy single strike attack «Vorpall Strike». Thirty percent physical, thirty percent fire and forty percent darkness.

Zgaaan!, a loud burst of sound emitted out, the sword penetrated the enemy's abdomen. The huge body five times my size was knocked back violently. At that time, the second attacks from Klein and the others were already completed. This time, everyone's avatar, including mine, was struck by the long skill delay.

The HP gauge of the gold Minotaur stained in deep red and decreased toward the left edge——

Then stopped and was left with only two percent remaining.

A cruel smile emerged from the bull head. The enemy had recovered from the delay, it drew its huge axe back horizontally. That must be a ranged attack using a high speed revolution which would result in an instant death if hit. A "jump back!" command resounded in my awareness, but my body wouldn't follow. The axe heartlessly shone, the whirling wind occurred at the boss' feet.

"No.....oooooooo!"

While my spirit screamed sharply, a blue gale ran past from my right side. The rapier held in its right hand released five consecutive thrusts at a speed so high our eyes couldn't see it. It was the high ranking extreme speed thin sword skill «Neutron». With the damage properties of twenty percent physical and eighty percent holy, the remaining HP of the gold Minotaur, who was readying itself to swing its axe, was silently robbed.

The movement of the evil-god halted. From behind, the black Minotaur which had completed its HP meditation brandished its axe in triumph. However, the partner who had been protecting it up until now was

screaming in a high pitched sound — its huge body blasted in all directions with a stiff sound effect.

.....Eh.

The eyes of the black Minotaur widened in surprise, and looked at the seven people who had recovered from their skill delay.

".....Alright, in front, that's the seat of honor."

Klein said quickly while baring his teeth.

Part 4

The katana user finished off the black Minotaur evil-god by stabbing it with his special skill, as if releasing the grudges he had kept up to this moment. Not paying any attention to the drop items on the spot the enemy avatar had burst apart, he turned around and yelled,

"Oi Kiritard! What did ya do just now!?"

That question obviously referred to my usage of one-handed sword skills while equipped with two swords, and explaining in detail would be very troublesome, so I obeyed my inner thoughts and said while giving my most troubled face,

".....Do I have to say it?"

"Course! After seeing something like that!"

It seemed I had pressed Klein's curiosity button, and since it was unavoidable, I answered briefly,

"It was a skill outside the system, «Skill Connect»."

Oo—, was the sound which flowed out of Lis, Silica, and Sinon mouth; suddenly Asuna pressed her fingertips to her right temple and growled,

"Um.....somehow, I got a strong feeling of Déjà vu....."

"It's just your imagination."

I shrugged my shoulders and clapped my hand on our healer-sama's back, whom despite her support duty in the back row, had sneaked in during the battle with the gold Minotaur to deliver the killing blow.

"This is not the time for relaxed talk. Leafa, how much time do we have left?"

"Ah, right."

After sheathing her long sword in its scabbard behind her waist, Leafa held up the medallion hanging from her neck. From a few steps away, I could see that the light within the jewel was almost completely lost.

".....At the current pace, we still have an hour or two."

"I see. —Yui, this dungeon structure has four floors right?"

I continued asking, so the little fairy sitting on my head the whole time responded clearly,

"Yes, the third floor is around seventy percent of the second floor size, the forth floor should be mostly the boss room."

"Thank you."

Stretching my right hand, my fingertips stroked my hair while I quickly considered the situation.

At this moment, in the Jötunheimr field far below us, the players accepting the «Frost Giant Tribe» side's quest and the hunting of the beast type evil-gods had gained momentum. The number of quest participants would only increase and not decrease. The remaining time was estimated to be around an hour. The battle with the last boss — probably «King Þrym» himself — should take about thirty minutes, we wouldn't be able to move to the third and forth floor within thirty minutes.

If there were a little more time, we could explain the situation to the players on the field, asking for their assistance in revoking the ongoing quest, but at this moment we didn't have enough time to go back to the ground. The other alternative was to message the fairy lord requesting reinforcements, but organizing a force in the capital city beyond the mountain range, moving it to the Alne plateau, and reaching Jötunheimr from the dungeon stairs, by the time they did them the sun would have set.

In other words, with just seven people, we were in a hopeless situation. — Or rather, factoring in the failure of «Queen Urðr»'side quest from the Cardinal's automatic quest generator function, Þrymheimr castle would surface on Alfheim, and trigger the start of a large-scale campaign quest

«Ragnarök». The fault was obviously the character who inherited its function from its creator.

Anyway——

".....In that case, I don't care if it's the king of the evil-gods or not, we will just «Smash» him for good!"

Lisbeth said that with a slap on my back, the rest of them altogether went "Oo!" in agreement. Where did they get that recklessness from? While thinking that, I strongly nodded.

"——Alright, everyone's HP and MP have fully recovered right? Then let's clean up the third floor quickly!"

The combined voice echoed once more, seven people then kicked the floor, and started running, aiming for the boss' room on the lowest floor, which was visible through the ice.

Just as Yui said, the third floor was clearly narrower than the second floor. It was natural for the lower parts of an upside down pyramid, but this place was quite a narrow and also had a complicated passage. For a normal clearing, we would be confused by the gimmick of the paths, but we had, enshrined on my head, the Navigation Pixie-sama which could give the latest model of an intelligent car navigation system a run for its money.

Our trump card accessed the map data, and with her instructions, we could run through the winding passage at full speed. Even the gimmick puzzles using levers, gears, or stepping switches were cleared without any time used to solve them. If this affair were to be observed from the outside, there would be no mistake for them to think that we were doing a time attack for the fastest clearing.

We ran into the sub-boss twice, but we still reached the boss room of the third floor in only eighteen minutes. What awaited us there had twice the size of the Cyclops and Minotaur from the previous floors, both sides of its long lower body had ten pairs of centipede-like feet, it was clearly the creepy evil giant, but it didn't have much physical resistance. Of course its attack power was through the roof, so the HP gauge belonging to Klein and me were in the red so many times after being targeted by it. This battle, which made my stomach sore later, when I thought that either of us dying would lead to a wipe, went on for nine minutes.

During that time; Lis, Silica, Sinon, and Pina tried their best to cut down the giant's feet one by one, I then finished it off with the «Skill Connect» which included multiple sword skills once it was unable to move. With our high spirits, we rushed into the fourth floor to beat King Þrym and his Niflheimr. Once we stepped into the passage leading to the boss room, we stopped, as in front of our eyes — a scene came into view.

It was a cage made of elongated icicles on the wall's edge.

Behind the fence caused by the stalactite growing sharply from both the ground and the ceiling, was a single figure. It was not of a giant's size. As it had collapsed on the ground, its accurate size was difficult to tell, but its body should be about the same height as the Undine Asuna's.

The skin was as white as the powdery snow lying thick around. The long flowing hair was a deep brown gold. The volume of the chest covered by the clothing that could be seen from her sorry state, it would be best not to say this out loud, as it could easily overwhelm all of our girl members. Both her hands and feet were shackled in the rugged ice.

The unexpected scene caused us to halt and feel worried, then the captive girl's shoulders made a sudden but subtle shake, as she lifted her face, with the blue chains ringing.

Her pupils were also of the same tea gold, like her hair. Her face, if it was a player avatar, would surely be because of overwhelming luck when it was created, or the account was bought with the large sum of money. However, her face was sublimed with the western European beauty, which was quite rare in this game.

Blinking once, her long eyelashes moved down then up, the girl said in a fine voice,

"Please..... Help me.....out of here....."

The katana user was sucked aimlessly toward the ice cage, I grabbed and pulled the bandana tail which dangled from behind his head.

"It's a trap."

"Trap."

"That's a trap."

The last two were Sinon's and Lis's words.

Klein straightened his back and turned around, as he made a subtle expression while scratching his head.

"O-Oh.....it's a trap. A trap, right?"

For the katana user on his death bed's sake, I asked in a small voice, "Yui?". The pixie on my head promptly replied,

"It's an NPC. Just like Urōr-san, there is connection to the language engine module. —But, there is one difference. This person has the HP gauge enabled."

Normally, the HP gauge of the quest giving NPCs would be disabled to prevent them from taking damage. The exceptions were, when the NPC was the escort quest's objective, or the NPC was actually——

"A trap."

"It's a trap."

"I think it's a trap."

Asuna, Silica, and Leafa said at the same time.

His eyebrows made a ㄥ shape, his eyes widened, and his mouth was pursed; I patted Klein's shoulder who was stiff in those complex expressions and quickly said,

"Of course it could be possible that it isn't a trap, but now we don't have time for trial and error. We need to reach Prym's place as early as possible, even if it is a second sooner."

"O.....Oo, hmm, well, that's right, yeah."

Klein nodded slightly and moved his glance from the ice cage.

When we ran until just a few steps before reaching the stairs, the voice came again from behind,

".....Please..... anybody....."

——To be honest, I also had the urge to help her, as I didn't think that NPCs were merely the system's automatically generated moving objects, but dwellers living in this world. If this was in a normal quest progression, helping that girl, accompanying her, and as the story progressed until the end, hearing her laugh from behind, "Uhahahaha, you fool—", would still be

amusing. However, we were not in the situation to take that unnecessary risk now. Just for this fact Klein would certainly——

The sound of footsteps on the ice which was aligned nicely up to this moment had one which was no longer synchronized.

The tall and thin body of the katana user turned around, his hands clenched and head facing downwards. He said in a low voice from his stubbly bearded mouth,

".....It's a trap. I understand it's a trap. ————But, even it's a trap. Even knowing it's a trap....."

Then he suddenly lifted his face up, it might have been my imagination but I saw something thin and blur on his eyes.

"Still.....no matter what, how could I leave this person behind! Even.....even if it leads to the failure of the quest..... leads to Alne's destruction even with all those, I'd still help her here, this is, this is my way of life —— for a bushidō like me!"

He then ran noisily back to the ice cage, as we watched Klein's back, there were two thoughts ran inside our minds —— namely ——

.....He's an idiot.

and,

Klein-san's so cool!

However, which thought had a higher count was a question which will never have an answer.

Klein shouted "I'll help you right now!" at the captive woman who supported her upper body with her hands, while grabbing his beloved katana with his left hand. At the next moment, he unleashed the iai sword skill «Tsujikaze» (Whirlwind), which destroyed one side of the icicle cage.

The girl rescued from the ice cage suddenly turned into a giant monster and attacked us —— fortunately, there was no ungrateful wretch like that.

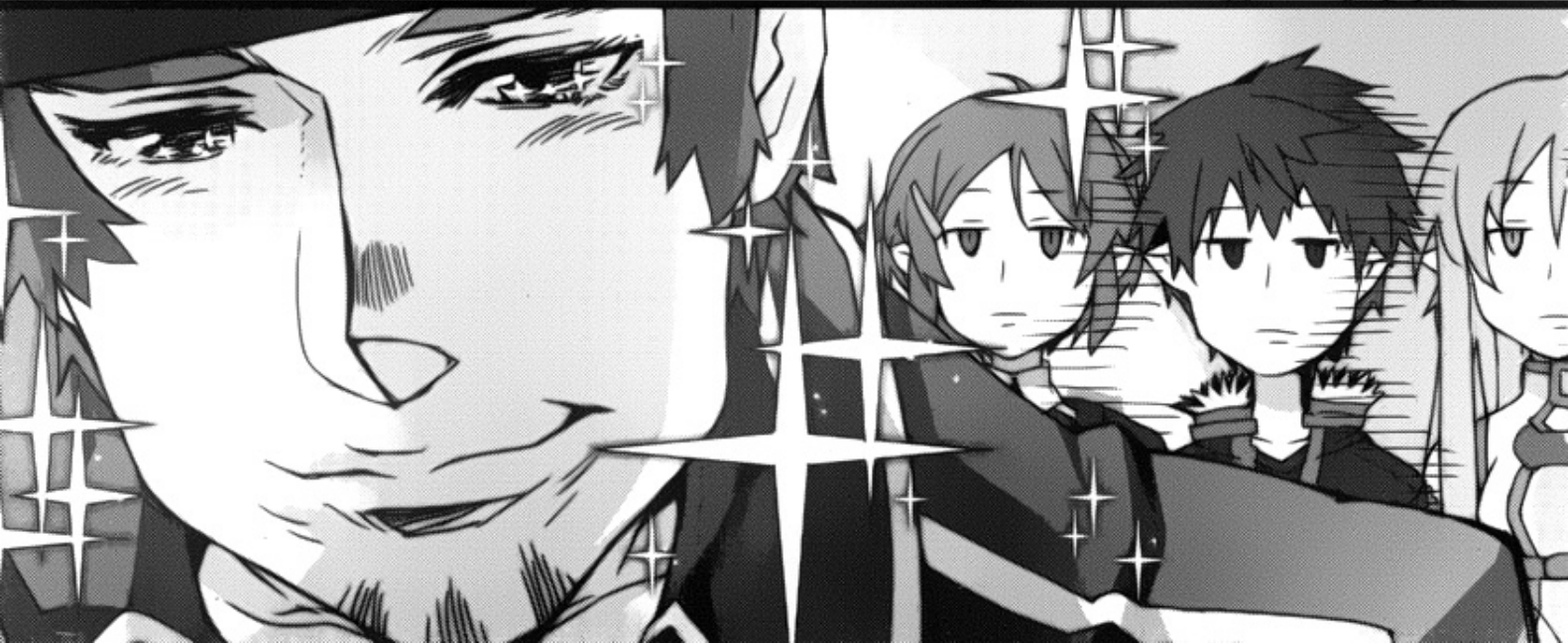
With four additional flashes from Klein's katana, the chain restraining her hands and feet were cut off, and the beautiful girl lifted her face weakly and whispered,

".....Thank you, Fairy Swordsman-sama."

"Can you stand? Any injuries?"

Squatting down and holding his right hand out, Klein was completely «immersed» in it. Well, during a quest in a VRMMO, being immersed in the story was the right practice. I was the same too, giving it my all in order to fulfill Queen Urðr's request to stop Giant King Þrym's ambition, Klein just took one wrong step here. It was wrong, but, how to say it——

"Yes....., I'm fine."



Nodding, the gold haired beauty stood up, but immediately stumbled lightly. Klein held his hand out like a gentleman to offer her support, then asked again,

"The exit is a bit far, could you go back alone, Nee-san?"

"....."

To that question, the beautiful girl's eyes looked downwards.

The «Automatic response/verbalize module engine» of the Cardinal System, to put it simply, was a system to answer 'B' if the player said 'A', but with extremely complex pattern lists. With the provisioning from advance prediction and learning functions, the NPC connected to the module could make a natural conversation with the player — of course it was still artificial — if observed carefully.

That module may have caused some breakthrough, but the automatic response NPC was still far from achieving the human-like «emotion» and unlimited «intelligence» of the little fairy Yui sitting on my head. While it was still a big difference from the fixed response NPC which replied with the same dialog no matter what was said, there were still many cases when the auto-response NPC was unable to understand player's speech, forcing them to find the «correct question».

I thought this might be the case from the silence of the golden haired beauty, however, unexpectedly, she raised her face and said before Klein could ask a new question.

".....I cannot just flee from the castle like this. In order to reclaim the tribe's treasure the Giant King Prym had stole, I crept into this castle, but I was found and caught by the third gate guardian. I couldn't leave without the treasure. If you would be so kind, would you please allow me to accompany you to Prym's room?"

"O.....u.....m....."

This time, Klein who held the «Man who lives bushidō life» banner was unable to find an immediate response and groaned awkwardly. Watching from several meters away, Asuna, who was next to me whispered quietly,

"Somehow, this is quite suspicious....."

"I think so too....."

I nodded in return, then Klein turned around from the girl, showed his sorry face to me and said,

"Oi, Kiri....."

".....Ah-well——, alright, alright. There's no choice but to go along until the end. It isn't 100% sure this is a trap anyway."

With my answer like that, Klein grinned and declared in high spirits to the beautiful girl.

"Alright, let's go nee-san! We're sharing the same destiny, let's kick Prym's butt together!"

"Thank you very much, swordsman-sama!"

At the same time the golden haired beauty clung to Klein's left arm, as the party leader, a dialog window appeared in my vision asking for the permission to let the NPC join.

"Let's hope Yui won't say anything odd—"

While mumbling, I pressed the 'Yes' button on the window. On the upper left of my vision, below the mini HP/MP gauge of the party members, an eighth gauge appeared.

The beautiful girl's name was [Freyja]. It was a name I wasn't sure I had heard before. Her HP and MP were really high, especially her MP, which had a quite surprising number. She was probably a mage type.

Like this, if she stayed as our companion until the end, she could really be great help, and while I thought so, I glanced at the medallion on Leafa's neck. The clean cut jewel seemed to be more than ninety percent in darkness now. The remaining time should be around thirty minutes, I inhaled deeply before speaking,

"From the dungeon structure, after descending those stairs it will probably be the boss' room. The boss is certainly stronger than those we faced so far, we'll just have to fight with our all. At the start, focus on defense while observing its attack patterns, and counter attack when there's a chance. Be careful when the boss' gauge changes to yellow or red as it might change its attack patterns."

Looking at the nodding party members, I exclaimed in a strengthened tone,

"——Last battle, fly ahead with full throttle!"

"Oo—!"

With the third shout since the start of the quest; Yui on my head, Pina on Silica's shoulder, and the golden haired beautiful NPC Freyja also raised their voices in chorus.

The width of the descending stairs increased as we went down, and the decorative objects on the surrounding pillars and statues became more gorgeous at the same time. The «approaching boss room and resulting map data would be larger» tradition from Aincrad was also present here.

Standing at the end of the path were two wolves carved into the massive ice gate. So this was the throne room of King Prym. Even though we made sure there were no gimmicks in the surroundings, we still approached the gate cautiously.

The gate began opening to both sides automatically once we were about five meters away. The cold air, along with a difficult to explain pressure, came from within. Asuna began re-applying supporting magics, and with Freyja's help, the maximum HP amount of all members were increased by an unknown buff.

Everyone made eye contact after confirming the numbers of buff icons below our HP/MP gauges. Then, we nodded and rushed in at once.

The interior was an extraordinarily huge space in both horizontal and vertical directions. The wall and floor were blue ice, like the rest of the dungeon. The purple fire swayed eerily on the ice candles. High up on the ceiling were chandeliers of the same color, lined up. But what grabbed our attention was the dazzling reflection from the left and right wall lined along the interior.

Gold. Gold coins and ornaments, swords, armors, shields, sculptures and furniture, all kinds of golden objects were piled up to a scale where it was impossible to count. As the insides of the room sank into darkness, the full extent of the treasure was entirely unfathomable.

".....How much Yrd are all these worth.....?"

Inside the room; Lisbeth, the only person who managed a player shop here murmured in a trance. But what was inside my mind was "With this much, your storage would surely explode!", of course I didn't say that to her.

On the right side of the party now standing still, would Klein still able to uphold his bushidō way of life? He walked aimlessly a few steps toward the treasure mountain. And, increased his speed as he approached the treasure——

".....A small bug is flying."

The low frequency mutter could be heard from the dark open space deep within the room, causing the floor to tremble.

"I hear an annoying buzz. Where is it? I'll crush the bad bug."

Boom, the floor trembled. Boom, boom, the trembles approached, it sounded as if it were so heavy that it might break the ice floor.

Once it reached the lighting range, a human shape appeared.

Giant —— wouldn't be a suitable word. The humanoid evil-god was huge even compared to the bosses we fought in this castle so far. Its height must be at least fifteen meters. Even if I jumped with full force, I wouldn't be able to reach the knee of those giant tree trunk sized legs.

Its skin color was dull blue, like lead. Dark brown fur coiled around its arms and legs, and I wondered what kind of large animal the fur came from. A single part of the plate armor on its waist had the size of a small boat. While the upper part of the body was bare, the prosperous muscle looked as if it was able to repel any weapons directed at it.

Its muscular chest had its blue beard hung over it. Its head above it sank into a silhouette and we could only see its outline. However, the gold crown on its forehead and the blue and bleak blinking eyes below shone brightly in the dark.

In the old Aincrad, the system limit of the floor height was a hundred meters, the boss room inside the labyrinth zone was also under the same rule, it was unavoidable for all boss monsters to have vertical size in moderation. So up until now, I had no experience in fighting with an enemy which I had to look up to. As I couldn't fly, how could I fight like this? The best I could do was cutting no higher than its shins.

While I was thinking about various things, the giant giant —— the double expressions are necessary to describe its size —— took another step closer, and laughed like a gong being hit,

"Hu, hu..... the Alfheim bugs? Creeping into this place under Urðr's seduction? How about this, you small fry. Just tell me where that woman is hiding, and you can take the gold in this room with you, hmm?"

With the enormous body and the crown on its forehead, along with the speech just now, this guy was the «Frost Giant King Þrym», no doubt about it.

It was Klein who faced and replied to the great giant, who was an AI like Urðr and Freyja.

".....Heh, a warrior just needs to eat, sleep, and laugh! Don't bother trying to tame us with a cheap invitation like that!"

While we made subtle expressions of relief from behind, as in front of us, Klein pulled his beloved katana from its scabbard.

With that signal, the rest of us took out our weapons as well.

They might not be the legendary class equipments, but all of them either carried the name of ancient class weapons, or were carved to a satisfactory level by the master smith Lisbeth. However, the daring smile under the long moustache of the Giant King Þrym didn't fade due to the light from our weapons. Maybe it was natural, as our weapons to him were just slightly longer than toothpicks to him anyway.

The shining phosphorescence from the dark eye sockets glared at us from a very high place, the glance stopped at the eight person who stood there unarmed.

".....Ho, ho. Isn't that Freyja-dono? Leaving the cage and coming here, does that mean you have already decided to become my bride, hmm?"

Klein suddenly turned around and yelled in a hoarse voice,

"B-Bride!?"

"Yes. That woman agreed to be my bride and came to the marriage in this castle. But on the eve before the banquet I caught her with the key to my treasury. So I put her in jail as punishment, hu, hu."

——The situation became complicated, I tried to rearrange the thoughts in my brain.

The golden haired beauty, whose name was Freyja, had said "in order to reclaim the stolen tribe's treasure, had crept into this castle." a while ago. But thinking about it clearly, the castle Prymheimr floating in midair had no windows and only had one entrance. So she decided to agree to a fake marriage to enter the castle without difficulty, then intruded into the throne room during the night to recover the treasure. But she was caught by the gate guardian and was chained up in prison as the result —— that kind of setting?

If that was the truth, then the possibility of being attacked by her from behind was low. But now the overall plot still couldn't be pinned together. The quest's sub-route was still confusing. First of all, of the nine fairy races of Alfheim, which one was Freyja's «tribe»? And what was her stolen treasure?

Those kind of things should have been asked when she joined the party, but now there was no longer any time; while I was thinking about that, Leafa, who was my left wing vanguard, pulled my sleeve and whispered,

"Hey, Onii-chan. I somehow feel like I read this somewhere..... Prym and Freyja..... The stolen treasure..... it was, hmmm, I'm certain....."

But before Leafa could finish, Freyja-san shouted with resolution from behind,

"Who would become your wife! Together with these swordsmen, we'll defeat you and take back the treasure you stole!"

"Nu, hu, hu, those are strong words. As expected from Freyja-dono whose beauty and bravery is heard of even at the end of the nine worlds. However, snapping the noble flower would give me great pleasure..... after smashing these small bugs, I'll love you deliberately, nuhuhuhu....."

As Prym patted his moustache with his massive hand while issuing his speech, I doubted if this was really the plot written by the automatic quest generator, as the speech was really testing the limits permitted in a game for all ages.

All the girls in the battle formation made similar frowning expressions, as Klein stood in front, clenching his left fist as he shouted,

"Y-Y-You bastard! Watch your mouth! This Klein-sama will never let you lay a finger on Freyja-san!!"

"OuOu, I hear a sound of buzzing wings. Well, I'll just subjugate you bugs first, as an advance celebration for the entire Jötunheimr becoming mine....."

Thump, the giant king suddenly stepped forward, its large HP gauge appeared on the upper right of my field of vision. Moreover, it was stacked three layers. Cutting that off would be very troublesome.

As the HP gauge of those evil floor bosses in the new Aincrad were invisible in order to frustrate the player's mind, compared to those bosses, this battle's pace would be much easier to grasp.

"——Come! Listen to Yui's instructions and focus on avoiding at the start!"

Immediately after my shout, Prym raised his huge rock-like right fist high up near the ceiling —— a blue frost storm wrapped its fist, then furiously swung down.

The last battle in Prymheimr castle —— but probably —— was as expected, a large and fierce battle I had never experienced.

The King Prym's early attack patterns were punches from both fists, three continuous stomping using the right foot, an ice breath in a straight line, and twelve ice Dwarf soldiers from the floor.

The most troublesome was the creation of the Dwarves, which was taken care of from the back of the party by Sinon's bow, cleaning them up in the blink of an eye by piercing their weak points with marvellous accuracy. The rest of the attacks were avoidable after observing its timing once, the counts from Yui also helped the three in the front row continue avoiding direct hits.

Once the defense was in place, it was finally the time to attack, however, this was certainly the hard part. As I had feared, our swords could only reach Prym's shins, and the thick fur protecting that area had high physical resistance, like the gold Minotaur. I took a small chance to attack it with a three hit sword skill, risking my HP to do so, but a low delay skill also had low attribute damage. The result was an unpleasant response, like hitting an indestructible object.

A great reassurance in this battle situation was the thunder magic attacks from Freyja-san. I certainly have no choice but to put all of my sincerity into saying "My bad!" to Klein later on. There was poor cooperation due to it

being from a NPC, but with each occasional purple shower of lightning from behind, Prym's HP was certainly shaved off

We fought hard in the battle for ten minutes before the first HP gauge finally depleted, causing the giant king to make an overpowered roar.

"Pattern changed! Be careful!"

As I shouted, Leafa who was next to me said in a nervous voice,

"This is bad, Onii-chan. Only three lights remain in the medallion. We may have fifteen minutes left."

"....."

Prym had three HP gauges. However, we took more than ten minutes to deplete one gauge. It could be said that cutting the remaining two gauges within fifteen minutes would be very difficult.

But, for this opponent, the «Skill Connect» wouldn't work like it did when we were fighting the gold Minotaur. During monster delay — or to say the delay occurring after its attack, «striking the weak point to create heavy concentrated damage» was needed. However, Prym was weak to neither sword nor magic, so even if the sword skill connected four times, it wouldn't be able to make much change to that amount of HP.

As if seeing the moment of my impatience——

Prym suddenly inhaled a large amount of the air, inflating his chest like a bellows.

An overpowering wind occurred, sucking in the five people in the front and mid rows. It's bad, this is surely the harbinger of a full force wide area attack. For evading, first of all, the sucking power of the wind magic must be neutralized. While I was thinking this, to my left, Leafa started reciting a spell.

But, there was probably not enough time once I noticed the enemy motion.

"Leafa, everyone, take defense!"

At my call, Leafa suspended the spell, crossed her arms in front and bent her body. All members took the same posture, in that moment,

From Prym's mouth, which had sent out a breath in a straight line many times up until this point, released a wide conal diamond dust.

The shining pale wind wrapped around us. The cold which penetrated Asuna's buff made it feel like our skin was being torn off. Gin, gin, with a sharp sound, the avatars of five people froze at once. I tried to escape, but the thick shell of the ice completely locked my movements. Leafa, Klein, Lis, Silica with Pina being hugged tightly to her chest, and I turned into blue ice sculptures.

At the moment, our HP gauge still haven't decreased. But we couldn't feel at ease. As this kind of special skill would increase the damage taken in direct proportion to the time being suspended.

Brym approached, then lifted up his massive right leg. Bad, pinch, danger. — as I screamed in my mind, at almost the same time,

"Nuuu—!"

With a thick roar, Brym stomped furiously on the floor. The violent shock wave from it swallowed us while we were still frozen——

Gaching! the frightening sound of breaking echoed throughout the hall, those of us covered in ice shattered. My eyes went dark due to shock. My body slammed hard on the floor while the damage effect light continued on.

At the edge of my vision, the top five of eight HP gauges suddenly turned to a deep red.

While the five vanguards got caught in Brym's large-scaled ranged attack, of course the three people in the back row weren't just watching.

Our HP gauges were taken by nearly eighty percent when suddenly, a soft blue light rained down on us, healing our wounds. It was Asuna's high ranked full recovery spell. The timing was perfect, which would be impossible to achieve without anticipating the occurrence of the damage and pre-casting the spell in advance.

However, in this game's large-scaled recovery magics, most of them were of the «Heal over Time» type, which didn't recovery all the lost HP instantly. So it'd be fatal if we were attacked again while our HP was still recovering.

Brym stepped forward in order to deliver the final blow to us who finally stood up. The long beard that hung over its throat — was suddenly pierced by a rapid succession of fire arrows blazing bright red, causing a

big explosion. It was Sinon's two-handed long bow sword skill «Explode Arrow». With ten percent physical, and ninety percent flame damage property striking the frost giant tribe's weak point, his HP gauge clearly decreased.

"Munuuuun!"

Brym raised an angry voice and changed his direction to target Sinon. The flashy attack on the enemy's weak point from the back row's damage dealers caused a massive amount of hate, taking over the hate of the vanguards, resulting in the enemy switching target was a mistake beginners always did; but of course, this wasn't the case this time. Sinon acted as a decoy, knowing it would likely lead to her death, to buy us time for recovery.

"Sinon, give me thirty seconds!"

While shouting, I gulped down a recovery potion from my pouch. Next to me, the others also poured similar red liquids down their mouths. Pina, Silica's partner, seemed to have narrowly survived because of its master's guard skill. In this world, unlike Aincrad, there was a pet resurrection spell, but taking time to do so during a battle would be very difficult.

My vision switched between the irritatingly slowly increasing HP gauge, and the blue Cait Sith's continuing to avoid Brym's fierce attacks. Even though Sinon had come to ALO not long ago, her body control was spectacular. In GGO, as a sniper who forfeited all defensive skills, running away was the only way if an attacker type approached, that experience was probably still with her now.

".....Prepare the attack."

Removing my eyes off the HP gauge, which had finally came back up to eighty percent, I called my companions. Re-gripping both of my swords, I began to start counting, in that instant——

"Swordsman-sama."

The sudden voice came from my side, I frighteningly turned my eyes.

Standing right beside me, was the person who was with Asuna just a moment ago, the eight party member —— Freyja.

The mysterious auburn pupils stared at me, and the AI-based NPC said,

"At this rate, defeating Prym is not possible. My wish is but one, buried somewhere in this room, just my tribe's treasure. With that returned, I'd regain my true power, and with that, be able to dismiss Prym."

".....T-True power....."

I spent a short moment lost in thought.

Then I reached my decision. This wasn't the first time I feared Freyja-san regaining her full power and then assisting Prym in attacking us. Also, if this endurance battle dragged on, the probability of quest failure due to insufficient time was high, which would lead to the catastrophe. In that case, I must lean on the remaining possibility.

"Understood. What kind of treasure?"

I quickly asked the NPC, and Freyja then spread her hands about thirty centimeters wide.

"It's about this big, a golden hammer."

".....Hah? H-Hammer?"

"Yes, hammer."

I stared to Freyja's face who had just returned the same answer, confused for half a second. At that time, Sinon, who was driven to the rear right wall of the throne room, took splash damage from Prym's attack, losing nearly twenty percent of her HP. Not being able to stand letting her to be the only target any more, I quickly said to Klein and Leafa,

"You go ahead to help her! I'll follow soon!"

"Roger!"

The katana user shouted the single word and bolted out while raising a war cry. While listening to the sound effect of the group battle which shortly began, I looked around the vast throne room.

The bunch of shining gold objects were piled high up along the blue ice wall's edge. How can I search for a single hammer among them? Certainly this might be the standard «searching for item» type of quest, but wasn't the difficulty too high!?

Perhaps this quest was supposed to be taken by a raid party of thirty people. Without that much manpower, searching for a single item from this mountain of treasures seemed impossible.

".....Yui."

With the feeling of wanting to rely on the Navigation Pixie on my head, I called her, to which she shook her head to the side in reply,

"Can't, Papa. There is no location of the key item in the map data. It was probably randomly placed in the room once we entered. It seems that to discover the location of the item in question and hand it to Freyja-san is the key objective."

"Is that so.....uu.....~~n.....!"

I concentrated thinking so hard that smoke would have emitted out of my ears, but this time there was no idea coming out. Was there nothing but to bet on the one in ten thousands chance by digging from a nearby mountain of treasures?

At that time, Leafa who struggled in the battle nearby looked at me for a moment and shouted,

"Onii-chan! Use a thunder type skill!"

"T-Thunder.....?"

My eyes widened in shock for a moment, but the next moment, I swung the sword in my right hand.

For me, who learned only the basic illusion spells, there was only one way to produce damage with thunder property.

".....Seyaaa!"

With a shout, I kicked the ground at full force and jumped. With a mid-air forward somersault, at the same time changing my grip on the sword to a backhand and thrusting my body downward. It was one of the few heavy ranged attacks in one-handed sword category, «Lightning Fall». Thirty percent physical and seventy percent thunder.

With the roar of dry thunder, the sword stabbed into the floor. From the center, blue-purple sparks shot out in all direction. I then lifted my body and

quickly turned around, my glance was at the group of surrounding objects which had been mowed down——

".....!"

I saw it. Deep within the mountain of gold, a purple light blinked briefly in response to the thunder I created. Clenching my teeth, I dashed to the upper left corner of the room. While looking at the huge chair on my right, which should be Prym's throne, I made a bodily dive into the mountain of treasure, discarding and throwing away the objects which would be very expensive——

".....Is this it!?"

Several seconds later, rolled out in front of my eyes, I stretched my hand to grab the meager item. It was a small hammer with thin golden handle and a bejewelled platinum head. As I grabbed and lifted it up, I could feel its frightening weight which could easily cause my avatar to sink into the ground. I put more force to lift it, turned around and shouted,

"Freyja-san, here!"

Then, due to a little impatience, I made a long throw using the built up momentum. I wouldn't be able to complain if this deed raised the NPC attack flag. Fortunately, the golden haired beauty caught the extremely heavy hammer I threw at her splendidly with her thin and slender right hand.

But immediately, her body curled as if being affected by the added weight. The long wavy hair flowed, and her exposed white back trembled slightly.

.....Eh, maybe it was the wrong item? Did I somehow pass something bad to her?

I started feeling impatient again —— then I heard Freyja-san's low whisper,

".....flowing....."

Pari, a thin spark appeared in the air.

".....verflowing.....it's overflowing....."

Somehow the odd speech seemed to match a beautiful witch more. Was it an error in the Cardinal's language engine module? But even so, the voice seemed strange. The sleek and husky voice up until now changed to hoarse and low cracking voice.

PariPari, the sparks became increasingly violent. The golden brown hair floated up softly, and the edges of the thin pure white dress fluttered vigorously.

"Over.....flowingggooooOooooooooo———!"

The third shout that gushed out was completely unlike the previous Freyja-san. The bad feeling was like it came from a different dimension, in front of my widened eyes —— the muscle of the beautiful pure white limbs and back rose up like ropes. At the same time, the white dress was torn off into pieces and disappeared.

In that moment, Klein who was fighting behind the hall turned around by the activation of his secret skill «hyper sense». His eyes began open wide at the stark naked body of Freyja-san. But the next moment, his jaw dropped.

It was no wonder at all. The whole body of Freyja-san, which was clad in a lightning flash, started growing larger. Three meters..... five meters..... and still wouldn't stop. The arms and legs were sturdy like big trees, the chest had been raised until it had exceeded Þrym's. The hammer in the right hand had also increased its size in accordance to the owner. In a short time, it had reached such a size that even a Gnome heavy warrior wouldn't be able to equip it, emitting intense lightning flashes in all directions.

At that point, the phenomenon that gave Klein and I the worst shock happened.

While facing down, from the cheek and jaw that became rugged and strong, appeared a golden brown and long, loong —— beard.

"It's a....."

"Grandpa!?"

The scream of two men echoed throughout the entire room.

So, now, the imprisoned woman who would walk along the bushidō road with Klein no longer exists in this world. The body raised up with an

overwhelming force, the fifteen meters tall giant, no matter how you looked at it, wouldn't be less than forty years old, it was clearly a nice middle.

"OOO.....OOOOO———!"

The giant old man released a roar that shook the entire hall with its electric shock-like bass, behind the hall, the King Þrym who had stopped moving turned around, then moved his right leg wrapped in the thick leather boots forward.

I fearfully moved my gaze toward the left edge of my vision, confirming at name carved in the bottom-most of the eight HP/MP gauges.

The letters which had formed [Freyja] just a little while ago had already changed shape.

[Thor]. That, was the name of our new companion.

Part 5

Even for me who was not very knowledgeable in myth and folklore, there were some of which I was somewhat familiar with.

In Norse mythology, the great god Óðinn^[8], clown god Loki, and a well known —— god of thunder Þórr. Armed with the hammer to call thunder, the figure that defeated giants one after another had been the motif in many films and games.

This was that Leafa told me later, the proper episode in Norse mythology about «Þórr reclaiming the hammer stolen by the giant king Þrym». In that myth, Þórr had disguised himself as the goddess Freyja in order to trick Þrym into a false marriage, the disguise was almost exposed many times during the banquet, but the cunning of Loki had helped them pass through, finally he reclaimed the hammer and proceeded to kill every giant there except Þrym, it was a cruel story I had never known before this. It was probable that the Cardinal System collected the legend, then arranged it to be used as this quest's sub route.

In other words, if one knew about this episode, once they heard the name Freyja, they would have immediately understood that she was not Þrym's spy. So I was very thankful for Klein's intuition and bushidō at the ice cage that helped Freyja out, however —— with Freyja's «true identity» revealed, I wondered what his state of mind was like right now.

"Nuuu-n..... you despicable giant, your punishment for stealing my treasure «Mjölñir» will be given right now!"

The god of thunder Þórr brandished the huge golden hammer in his right hand, he rushed into battle using the momentum from kicking the thick floor.

The frost king Þrym standing opposite breathed onto both of his hands, creating a battle axe of ice there. Swinging the axe, he shouted in return,

"You small dirty god, you dare trick me! I'll cut the beard from your face off and send you back to Ásgarðr!^[9]"

If we thought about it, Þrym truly believed that the Freyja just now was the real goddess, and was waiting eagerly for the wedding. Even though he was a bad guy, at least he had the right to be angry.

In the center of the open space, the gold moustached and the blue moustached giants shouted and exchanged blows with each other using the golden hammer and the ice battle axe. The impacts that were sent out shook the entire castle. Still not recovering from the shock of Freyja's change into a giant — no, into a grandpa, we stood around with eyes wide open in confusion, and before long, Sinon, who already finished recovering her HP, shouted sharply from the back of the room,

"Everyone attack now, while Þórr is the target!"

Yes, that was absolutely correct. There was no guarantee that Þórr would be able to fight until the end. I also swung my sharp swords and raised my voice.

"Alright, full attack! Use sword skills without holding back!"

Then, seven people kicked the floor and approached Þrym from all directions.

"Nuuooooooooo————!"

Emitting exceptionally intense fighting spirit, with his katana raised high in his battle stance, it seemed there was something glittering at the corner of Klein's eyes, but as mercy to the warrior I pretended not to see it. Without worrying about the skill delay, we continued using more than three-hit sword skills on both of Þrym's legs. Asuna also changed from her wand to her rapier without me noticing, her god speed thrusting attack shook the

Achilles tendon. Lisbeth beside her repeatedly hit Þrym's little finger with the mace held in both hands.

"Gu.....numuu.....!"

Þrym let a growl leak while his body shook, and finally, his left knee hit the floor. A dazzling yellow light effect circled his crown's perimeter. It was the stun condition.

"Now's the chance.....!"

According to my call, every member released their highest combo attack. Bright light effects covered the bare upper body of Þrym. In addition, from the sky, orange shining arrows poured down like rain.

"Nuuun! Return to the abyss, giant king!"

In the end, Þórr delivered the final blow by slamming the hammer in his right hand at Þrym's head. The crown broke and flew off, and the boss monster that once seemed like an iron wall collapsed onto the ground with a loud crash.

Its HP gauge had already disappeared. The tip of its limbs and its moustache turned into ice as it made a creaking sound.

Its jet black eye sockets with the blinking blue phosphorescence faded and vanished. At that time, the tangled moustache moved, and a low laugh flowed out,

"Nu huhuhu..... you little bugs can enjoy your triumph now. But let your guard against the æsir down and you'll see painful experience..... Because they are the true..."

Zumun! the sound of Þórr's intense stomp exploded, he then tread onto the almost completely frozen Þrym.

A tremendously large scaled End Flame occurred, as the frost giant king turned into countless numbers of ice shards and scattered. Due to the pressure of the effect, we involuntarily held up our hands and took a few steps back, the god of thunder Þórr glared at the scene with his golden eyes from high above.

".....Hmmm, I give you my thanks, Fairy Warriors. I was also able to wash away the disgrace of my treasure being stolen. ——Now, there must be a reward."

He then lifted his left hand and touched the handle of the gorgeous giant hammer in his right hand. One of the inlaid jewels came out easily, emitted light and turned into a small, human-sized hammer.

Þórr then dropped the scaled down version of the real golden hammer to Klein.

"«Thunder Hammer Mjölner», use it well in battle. And ——— farewell."

Þórr held up his right hand and the pale lightning immediately penetrated the wide open space. We closed our eyes reflexively, and when we opened our eyelids, he was no longer there. The member withdrawal dialog floated up, and the eighth HP/MP gauge soundlessly disappeared.

On the spot where Þrym had disappeared, a bunch of drop items rolled down like a waterfall, which then automatically disappeared into the party's temporary storage.

At the same time, an intense light shone in the boss room, driving away the darkness. Regretfully, the mountain of golden objects by the wall also faded away. Well, all of our storage was almost full, so we couldn't keep them anyway.

".....Phew....."

I let out a small breath, then walked to Klein's side, then placed my hand on his shoulder and said,

"Legendary weapon get, congratulations."

".....I don't have any hammer skills though."

Gripping the one-handed battle hammer glittering with an aura effect, the katana user who had a sad smile earlier returned to his usual energetic smile.

"Then, I'd be glad to give it to Lis. Ah— but don't dissolve this into ingots....."

"Wait! No matter how many ingots I can get I won't do something as wasteful as that anyway!"

Next to Lisbeth who was objecting, Asuna said seriously,

"But Lis, dissolving legendary items seems to yield a lot of Orichalcum ingots."

"Eh, really?"

"O-Oi! stop talking about dissolving it already!"

Everyone laughed at Klein who shouted while hugging the hammer tightly to his chest——

At that moment,

The ice floor shook violently along with a heavy bass sound at such a high volume that it could shake the core of the body.

"Kyaa!"

Silica screamed with her triangular ears faced down. Sinon next to her, who had her tail bent into an S shape, shouted,

"It.....it's moving!? No, it's floating.....!"

I might be a bit late, but I noticed too.

The giant castle Þrymheimr shuddered like a living thing, and seemed to rise slightly, little by little. Why is this —— no —— could it be, when I thought until this point,

Leafa took a peek at the medallion under her neck then gushed out in a high-pitched voice,

"O.....Onii-chan! The quest is still ongoing!!"

"W.....What!?"

Shouted Klein. It was the same feeling I had. With the chief of the frost giant tribe dead, normally the quest would have been completed too —— but, my memory started recalling what «Queen of the Lake Urðr» said when we were asked to do the quest.

Invading Þrymheimr and removing the holy sword Excaliber from the pedestal. Defeating Þrym wasn't the objective. In other words, Þrym, the formidable enemy, was just one of the hurdles for the quest's progression——

"L-Last light is flashing now!"

In a voice similar to Leafa's scream, Yui responded sharply,

"Papa, stairs appeared behind the throne!"

".....!!"

Without sparing any time to reply, I furiously kicked the floor and dashed toward the throne.

As I approached, in the shape of a chair, aside from it being fifteen meters tall as it was for the frost king Þrym's exclusive use, the throne looked like a small hut. If we weren't in an emergency, we would try to climb up to the seat, however, I ran to its left side without looking up at all.

When I turned to the throne's back, just as Yui said, the ice floor had opened, showing a small descending staircase. It was clearly the size one from the frost giant tribe wouldn't be able to pass, the size was for a human — no, a single fairy was barely able to pass. While hearing the approaching footsteps of my companions, I plunged into the dim entrance without hesitation.

While running down the spiral staircase skipping three steps at a time, I thought in a corner of my mind. If we failed the quest we received from Urðr — and at the same time, the large number of the players on the ground were successful in the slaughter quest, the giant ice castle Þrymheimr would float up and surface in the middle of the capital city Alne; however, Þrym, who had the ambition of invading Alfheim was no longer there. Well, the «came back to life as if nothing had happened» line was also not impossible, but I didn't think the Cardinal System which had always stuck profusely to details would expand the story in such an aggressive manner.

Thinking while running down at full speed, as if she could read my thought, the voice of Leafa came from behind me,

".....Well, Onii-chan. I can't recall it clearly..... but what if the master of Þrymheimr isn't Þrym in the real Norse mythology?"

"E.....Eh!? But, the name....."

"I think so too. But, in the legend is certainly.....Th.....Th....."

While Leafa was mumbling, Yui on my head who referred to the outside network immediately replied,

"It's «Þjazi»^[10]. In the legend, the one who wants the golden apple that Urðr mentioned was him, not Þrym. And next is the information from within

ALO, the request of the problematic slaughter quest came from the biggest castle on Jötunheimr ground, was from an NPC named «Archduke Þjazi»."

".....In other words, the successor was there since the beginning then....."

Perhaps when Prymheimr floated up into Alne, Þjazi would be in the throne room above, giving out commands like a last boss. But letting the Cardinal's intention of destroying the capital city and invading the Alne plateau wasn't on my mind, I didn't come this far to just surrender here. Rather than not obtaining Excaliber, I wouldn't be able to face our friend Tonkii. Of course if the sword was there along the way, I wouldn't hesitate to grab it either.....

While I was thinking those various thoughts, the tremor that wrapped around the castle became increasingly violent. Sometimes the change in G force could be felt intensely, it was clear that the castle was piercing the canopy. I held my breath and continued throwing my momentum down the spiral staircase which I didn't know how far down it went.

"————Papa, five more seconds until we reach the exit!"

"OK!"

I shouted, just as the bright light up ahead entered my field of vision, I jumped ahead at full force.

What was there was a regular ice octahedron, or a hollowed room in the shape of a superimposed upper and lower parts of a pyramid. The so-called «Burial Chamber».

The wall was quite thin, the entire Jötunheimr field could be seen from the lower part of the ice. On the surroundings, fragments of rock and crystal continued falling down from the canopy. The spiral staircase pierced the center of the burial chamber and continued down toward the bottom.

Then, at that point — was a deep pure golden light.

There is no mistake, when Leafa and I rode on Tonkii's back to escape from Jötunheimr, this was the same twinkling light we saw inside the bottom of the ice castle. Nearly a year had passed and we finally made it here.

When all seven people came down the staircase, we surrounded «that» in a half circle.

At the very center of the circular floor, a 50cm dimensioned ice cube was enshrined. Something small seemed to be trapped inside. When I stared at it closer, it seemed to be thin and delicate tree roots. The countless number of threads that looked like capillary gathered and huddled thicker toward the single main root.

The main root had a diameter of around five centimeters, however, it was cleanly cut. At the place it was cut was a thin and sharp blade inscribed with the detailed runes — the sword. The shining golden long sword extended vertically, half of the blade was exposed from the ice plinth. It had a detailed knuckle guard and black leather was tightly knitted around the hilt. Its pommel was shining with a big iridescent jewel.

I once saw the very same sword, no I had grabbed it before.

The man who used ALO as a tool for his own ambition, in order to cut me, tried to create it using the GM's power. However, that power was transferred to me by the person who had higher authority than him, I generated the sword and gave it to him in order to settle it all.

At that time, I had produced the world's strongest sword with just a single command, but I had a strong sense of aversion to it. Without the challenge to obtain the sword by proper means, the feeling of borrowing but not returning wouldn't disappear. Although more than half was by chance, but the time had finally come.

.....Sorry for the wait.

As I whispered in my mind, I made a step forward, my right hand grabbed the hilt of the long sword — the legendary class weapon «Holy Sword Excaliber».

".....!!"

I put all my strength into pulling it out of the pedestal.

However, it felt like the sword and the plinth, no, the entire castle had become a single object, as it didn't even creak a little. With my left hand helping, both legs firmly planted, mustering all my strength.

"Nu.....o.....!!"

But the result was the same. Bad vibes caused a chill to go down my spine.

In ALO, unlike in SAO and GGO; strength, agility and other numerical stats weren't shown in the system window. The boundary if a certain weapon or armor could be equipped was also vague, from «Easy to handle», «Somewhat challenging», «Body would be swayed», to «Difficult to lift up», changing in non-gradual stages. So among the players, there were many that even though the weapon obtained by sheer luck was so overweight, they still didn't give up, but wore it, causing their combat power to be lowered as a result.

But even so, the system needed to handle those stats in numerical values, in other words, they were «hidden parameters». The basic value was determined by race and constitution, then applied with boosts from skills and bonuses from magic equipments, and supporting magics could adjust the value even further. Comparing Klein as a Salamander against me as a Spriggan, Klein would have only a slightly higher base value.

But as he loved katana techniques, all his skill and equipment adjustments were based on agility. On the other hand, with the tendency of «loving heavy swords», my adjustment was focused mainly on strength. As a result, among the seven people here, I was without doubt the one with the highest strength. So if I couldn't pull the sword out with my strength, no one else would be able to either. As everyone seemed to understand this, no one asked for an attempt.

Instead, I could hear voices from behind me,

"Keep at it, Kirito-kun!"

It was Asuna. Then Lis raised her voice saying "Yeah, just a bit more!". The encouragement from Leafa, Silica, and Klein also came right after that.

Sinon shouted "Show me your willpower!", Yui said "Papa, keep at it!" with all her little voice, even Pina purred with "Kurururuu!".

As the person who assembled this party, becoming discouraged here wasn't an option. I already got the maximum buffs, the rest was just fighting spirit and will power. Rather than thinking the parameter wasn't high enough, I had to believe that the lock would be released with the multiplication of the input and time, mustering my strength, no, my will power to the limit.

The surroundings in my vision started to white out, a flickering light flew in front of my eyes, if this continued any longer, the AmuSphere would

automatically disconnect me due to an abnormality in the brain waves ——
at that time,

Piki, with a sharp sound, and at the same time, a faint vibration transmitted
to my hands.

"Ah.....!"

I didn't know whose yell that was. Suddenly a light burst out from the
pedestal under my feet, as golden light filled my entire vision.

Immediately after that, a crushing sound which was more profound and
exhilarating than any sound effect we had heard up until now ran through
our ears. My body fully stretched out —— inside the ice lump which was
scattering in all directions, my right hand held the long sword which created
a vivid golden track in the air.

Flying significantly behind me were my six companions who were using
their hands to extend support to each other. While withstanding the
tremendous weight of the sword I was holding, I faced up above, my vision
met with everyone overlooking from above. All members of the party
started smiling, and released a great joyful atmosphere —— Although I
had already assumed so, the next phenomenon happened sooner than
expected.

Small tree roots were released from the ice pedestal.

Floating in mid air, it suddenly stretched out, no, it started growing.

The very fine capillary spread downward in succession. The upper section
which had been cut off also had new tissue growing upward from the cut
wound.

From above, a tremendous roaring sound could be heard. Looking up, the
hole which we had ran through and the spiral staircase had been crushed
by something rushing down. It was also roots. The one which supported
Prymheimr, the roots of the world tree——

The thick roots rushed into the octagonal room with a blistering pace, the
small roots which extended from the plinth touched them, twisted together,
and united.

The next moment——

The slight vibration which was felt like a shindo 1 earthquake up until now sent out a shock wave that swallowed the entire Prymheimr castle.

"Owa.....b.....breaking.....!!"

Klein yelled, as everyone mutually held onto each other firmly, while numerous cracks ran through the surrounding wall almost simultaneously.

The deafeningly loud echo roared continuously. The thick wall of ice, about the size of a carriage separated from each other, dropped to the «Great Void» far below.

".....! The entire Prymheimr castle had collapsed! Papa, we need to escape!"

Yui on my head screamed in sharp voice. I looked at Asuna's face on my right and shouted,

"Even saying so, the stairs!"

Yes, the spiral staircase which we used to reach this burial chamber had already been blown off by the rushing world tree's roots, leaving no trace behind. Even before that, going back the original route would only lead us to the open terrace in the mid air.

"If we could grab the roots....."

Sinon murmured while looking up, she was still calm even in this situation.

".....Seems impossible."

I shrugged my shoulders. Surely, the roots of world tree stretched from the ceiling and reached the middle of the chamber, but we were on the circular floor below, which was about ten meters below the capillary. It wasn't a distance we could reach even with a full force jump.

"Wait, the world tree! Don't be so cold-hearted!"

Lisbeth raised her right fist while yelling, but her opponent was a tree. She wouldn't even get a single apology from it.

"Right.....if it comes to this, Klein-sama will show you all the Olympic class vertical high jump!"

The katana user stood up abruptly then ran up to one end of the six meters diameter circular disc——

"Ah, idiot, don't....."

Before I could stop him, his gorgeous jump already happened before my eyes. He could reach around 2.15 meters, it was splendid considering he had a short running start, however, his hand couldn't reach the root before his body continued on a parabolic curve and dropped heavily onto the center of the floor.

At that moment, It was surely from the shock wave earlier. —— was what everyone tried to think —— while running cracks suddenly appeared on the surrounding walls.

The lower section of the burial chamber, in other words, the lower apex of the Þrymheimr castle had finally separated from its body.

"C.....Klein-san you idiot—!"

Came from Silica who was not used to screaming except when her tail was pulled; the rounded disc carrying seven people + one + one pet broke into an endless free fall.

If this were a gag manga, in this scene everyone would just sit around and drink tea as if it were completely normal.

However, dropping in a VRMMO like this was really ultra scary. It might be my daily hobby to fly above the clouds in Alfheim, but that was because of the reliable wings. With flying forbidden, such as in dungeons, a beginner female player could taste terror just by jumping from a five meter height. Even I didn't like it.

Therefore, the seven of us crawling on the circular ice disc couldn't help but scream simultaneously.

Surrounding us were the lumps of ice that collapsed at the same time, clashing with each other, as they continued breaking into smaller pieces. Looking up above, the lower part of the giant castle Þrymheimr broke apart from its structure, and each time caused the roots of the world tree to tremble.

Finally, from the edge of the disc, I fearfully took a peek below.

A thousand meters, no, it should be about eight hundred meters from the Jötunheimr ground, the darkness «Great Void» had its mouth open. Of course the disc we were sitting on was rushing toward the center.

".....What is down there?"

A calm mumble came from Sinon, I somehow managed to answer,

"P-Pr-Probably as Urðr-san said, M-M-Maybe it leads to Niflheimr!"

"It would be great if it's not cold....."

"N-N-Noo, I think it's super cold! I-I-It's the hometown of the frost giants after all!"

Having a conversation like that finally helped loosen the constriction in my stomach, while my hands still hugged Excaliber, I asked Leafa to my left,

"Leafa, W-W-What happened to the S-Slaughter quest?"

Then, the Sylph with her pea green ponytail trailing vertically stopped screaming — or perhaps it was a joyful shout, I have my doubts — and looked at the medallion on her chest.

"Ah.....W-We've made it Onii-chan! There is still a single light remaining! I-I'm glad.....!"

Leafa made a full smile and jumped to me with open arms, while I stroked her hair and started thinking,

If the world tree had returned to its original shape, Urðr and her kin would have regained their power as well, so they would no longer be hunted by the humanoid evil-gods. In that case, if we continued falling into the Great Void, be it dying during the fall or dying due to crashing upon Niflheimr, our sacrifice wouldn't be in vain.

There was only one worry, it was «Excaliber» which we used all our power to secure. The quest wasn't properly completed, as I still couldn't say I had obtained ownership of it yet. Perhaps, surviving and meeting with Urðr again were the required flags for the clean completion of this quest?

Nevertheless, I spread the system window where Leafa couldn't see and tried to put Excaliber into the storage. But the sword was repelled from the window, and wouldn't settle in.

——Well, I already grabbed it once. It's fine, such a gold sparkling legendary weapon like this isn't my taste anyway.

I tried to fool myself using the sour grapes theory.

Leafa who was embracing my neck suddenly raised her face.

".....I hear something."

"Eh.....?"

I reflected the air off my ears to listen carefully, but all I could hear was the groaning sound of the air. The ground was already much closer now. Falling and breaking into the Void would probably take about sixty more seconds.

"Here, again!"

Leafa shouted again and stood skillfully on the rounded disc.

"O-Oi, it's dangerous....."

As I started calling, at that time,

Kuoooo—.....n, a cry from the distance reached my ears, I realized.

I turned around and adjusted my vision. Beyond the group of ice lumps surrounding us, from the southern sky, was a small white light. Approaching in a small arc, with its streamlined body like a fish, four pairs of wings, and a long nose——

".....Tonkii———!"

Leafa shouted with both hands cupped around her mouth. Once again, Kuoo—n returned. Without a doubt, that was the flying evil-god Tonkii who carried us until the entrance of Þrymheimr. Thinking about it, as Tonkii sent us there, coming to pick us up wasn't strange. And of course we would want it to come too.

"R.....Right here right here—!"

Lis shouted while Asuna also waved her hand. Silica raised her face fearfully while still hugging Pina tightly in her chest, Sinon waved her tail in relief.

Klein who was still in the landing pose from his ultra high jump also lifted his face and smiled while putting his right thumb up.

"Heheh.....'right, I believed from the start..... this guy would surely come to help....."

——Bull shit!

That was what I, and probably the other five, shouted in our minds, as he was the same person who had forgotten about Tonkii up until now. Still as admirable as usual, Tonkii gradually glided toward us. There was plenty of time to transfer all the members before the crash.

Because of the numerous scattering ice lumps around us, the closest Tonkii could hover near us still left us with a five meter gap. But with such a gap, even a heavy player would had no problem jumping over.

The first one was Leafa, who jumped casually while humming, and landed splendidly on Tonkii's back. Then she stretched out her hands with a "Silica-chan!" call.

Silica nodded single-mindedly, as both her hands grabbed Pina's legs, then running awkwardly before firmly launching out. Pina, which Silica was dangling under, flapped its wings, boosting the flying distance. It was a tamer's privilege from a flight type pet. She then stopped in Leafa's embrace safely.

Next was Lisbeth who jumped along with a "Toryaa!" shout, along with Asuna who made a long jump with a fluid form. Sinon was the extreme one, jumping with double forward somersaults and landing near Tonkii's tail.

Klein turned to me with a stiff expression, I made a gesture telling him, 'Please feel free to go first.'

"Right, prepare to be fascinated by my splendid....."

I slapped his back while he was saying that and measuring his timing. Struggling with the running start's distance, his jump's distance did not seem to be enough, but Tonkii stretched its nose to catch him in mid air.

"O-Owaaaaa!? S-S-Scaryyyyyy!?"

Ignoring his yell, I looked downward once more. Beyond the rounded disc made of clear ice, the Great Void had filled entire my field of vision. Facing forward, preparing a short approach run——

At that point, I noticed one terrible fact.

I couldn't jump.

To be more exact, in my arms was a heavy load — the «Holy Sword Excaliber», so jumping five meters wouldn't be possible. Just by standing, my boots already bit into the ice.

Everyone who already moved to the back of Tonkii also noticed the reason I stood still.

"Kirito!"

"Kirito-kun!"

Calling voices reached me. Still facing downward, I clenched my teeth from the intense conflict.

These two choices — embracing Excaliber like this and dieing from the fall, or dropping it and surviving. Is it the coincidence that a player is being tested for greed and obsession at the final five meters distance? Is this also a trap by the Cardinal System.....?

"Papa....."

A worried call from Yui on my head, I made a slight nod and reply,

".....Really.....you Cardinal!"

I shouted with a bitter smile.

At the next moment, the sword in my right hand was thrown aside.

Suddenly my body became so light it was as if it was a lie. The rotating faint golden light moved toward the edge of my vision.

I made a light run, jumped, and changed my body orientation in mid air. Excaliber was falling slowly, like a feather dropped from the wing of a phoenix, into the immeasurable depth of the great hole.

On Tonkii's back, once I had made a backward landing, it spread all eight wings wide. Its speed slowed down. Tonkii, that had been falling at the same pace as the rounded disc up until now, began hovering, stopping its descent.

Asuna came to me and tapped my shoulder.

".....Later, someday, we'll take it back."

"I'll perfectly coordinate our journey!"

Yui continued right after Asuna.

".....Ah, that's right. It'll surely be waiting somewhere in Niflheimr."

I muttered, as I said the farewell in my mind to the strongest sword I certainly had held for a short time —— or so it seemed.

In order to prevent that, stepping in front of me, was the blue haired Cait Sith.

Her left hand brought the big long bow down from her shoulder, and her right hand paired it with a silvery thin arrow.

"——Two hundred meters, huh."

She muttered, then quickly recited a spell. The arrow was wrapped in a white light.

In front of us, who were stunned as we watched, the archer as well as sniper Sinon casually drew the bow to its full extent.

About forty-five degrees below, on the other side was the falling Excaliber, the arrow was released. It flew through the air, leaving a strange silvery line. It was a bow user's exclusive common spell «Retrieve Arrow». The spell was convenient for pulling something the hand couldn't reach, however, it was used only for short distances because the thread attached distorted the trajectory of the arrow, thus lowering the homing value down to zero.

Finally understanding Sinon's intention, I shouted in my mind "No matter the cost."

It was not possible anyway. Two hundred meters was twice the effective range of the bow made by Lis. No, even if it was within the shooting range, she wasn't in a condition to aim properly. Her footing was unstable, the surrounding ice was falling, and her target was also falling.

But —— but, but.

The falling golden light over there, and falling alongside it, the silvery arrow seemed to be attracting each other as it moved closer, closer.....

Taan! Their collision caused a light sound.

"Alright!"

Sinon pulled the magic thread stretching out from her right hand with all her might. The golden light decelerated, halted, then began to rise. Rotating, and gradually approaching. The small golden light started becoming longer and narrower, taking the shape of a sword.

Two seconds later, the legendary weapon which I had said farewell to, had resided in Sinon's palm.

"Uwa, heavy....."

Muttering as she held it in her hands, Cait Sith-sama then turned around.

""Si.....Si.....Si.....""

The voices of six people and Yui was in perfect synchronization.

""Sinon-san, so cool—————!"

Sinon responded to our praise with a down and up motion using her triangular ears — as both her hands were holding the sword, she looked at me and shrugged lightly.

"Here you are, there is no need to make that face."

——I was apparently too careless, it was as if a big "I want that!" was written on my forehead with a black magic pen. Sinon inadvertently stared to the upper left while holding out the sword to me, with a "Here" voice.

A faint déjà vu. About two weeks ago, in the event to decide the strongest in GGO «Bullet of Bullets 3» battle royale tournament's final round, Sinon had made the very same action. What I received by reflex back then was a one hit kill plasma grenade, Sinon and I stuck together and both died from the bomb immediately after that, leading to the conclusion of the match. People on the net had been trying to interpret that last scene, but it was eerie so there was no further investigation.

But this time, surely the sword wouldn't explode.

"T.....Thank you."

As I said thanks, I held out my hands to receive it — but the sword was pulled back.

"Before that, promise me one thing."

Then the blue haired Cait Sith gave a bright smile, it was without a doubt the highest class in ALO —— although with a destructive power equal to ten plasma grenades hidden in it.



"——Every time you pull this sword out, make sure you always think of me, alright?"

Bikki—n.

During the suddenly frozen atmosphere, the golden holy sword «Excaliber» moved from Sinon's hands to mine. But it was unbelievable, I couldn't feel its weight at all, instead I felt an imaginary chill and sweat flowing down my back.

"O—o, it's sure difficult for you, popular-bro."

From right behind me, Klein said so without reading the atmosphere, I stepped on his foot to make him silent, then said in the calmest voice I could muster,

".....Yeah, I'll keep that in mind, you have my thanks. Thank you, that shot just now was magnificent."

"You're welcome."

Sinon delivered the final blow with her wink, then turned around and moved in the direction of Tonkii's tail. She then took a stem of mint from the quiver on the right of her waist and held it in her mouth, it seemed to be her way of a quick rest. It was a cool action suiting the live wire sniper, however, I didn't miss noticing that the tip of her blue tail was wriggling. That was the sign saying she was in laughter. I've been had! As I groaned inside my mind, there was nothing I could do about the stabbing glances from the group of girls around me.

But here, the one who gave me a life boat out of that situation was unexpectedly Tonkii.

"Kuooo——n....."

It made a long cry, while its eight wings flapped powerfully and started ascending. Looking up into the sky, it seemed the largest and final spectacular scene of this quest was about to start.

The whole Þrymheimr castle which had pierced deeply into the center of the canopy in the underground world Jötunheimr finally started falling.

While its lower section had already collapsed leaving no trace behind, it still kept its whole form. The castle we could see from the inverted pyramid up until now had hidden its same sized upper section. In other words, it

had the same form as the burial chamber in which Excaliber was sealed in, a regular octahedral form.

It had a length of three hundred meters on each side. So, the distance between the top and bottom apex equaled to $300 \times \sqrt{2}$ or 424.26 meters. The height of the Tokyo Sky Tree's special view lobby was 450 meters, so the castle's height was already approaching it. I was glad the dungeon structure didn't require us to climb up to the top before we could descend to our destination.

While my mind went in circles around calculations and speculations which didn't matter any more, the great ice castle continued to fall down while making a thunderous roar. The intensity of the wind pressure we had to endure increased along with the collapse. The numerous cracks, like the polar crevasse, spread up from its lowest part, and over time, the few large pieces started to detach from it.

".....That dungeon, gone after we had adventured in it just once....."

Lis murmured quietly. Silica, who was next to her, hugged Pina tightly and nodded in response.

"It's a bit waste. There are a lot of rooms we haven't explored yet....."

"The map completion rate is 37.2 percent."

Was the supplement from Yui sitting on my head said in a regretful voice.

"That's luxury talk. ——But I had a lot of fun."

With both hands on his waist, Klein nodded deeply. And, as if he had noticed something, he turned around and said in a strange voice,

".....Hey Leafa. How to say this, well.....about Freyja, she really exists as a real goddess-san right? Aside from that grandpa Þórr?"

"Yeah, that's right."

Leafa nodded then smiled.

"O—, is that so. Well, I have a chance to meet her somewhere then."

".....It might be."

In ALO, Ásgarðr, the place where the æsir lived, didn't exist, but Leafa was kind enough not to say so. When I thought up to this point, I recalled what

Þrym said before Þórr could stop him. It was certainly about the æsir.....what did he say though.....

I tried to search my memory, but my thoughts were drowned out by the loud agony of death of Þrymheimr castle, which had finally completely collapsed.

As I cruised on Tonkii's back, the falling groups of large ice lumps looked like it was at a distance I could reach if i stretched my hand. They were swallowed by the big hole directly below, vanishing into the infinite darkness of the «Great Void»——

.....No, it wasn't like that.

I could see a light from the bottom of the hole. Glittering blue and waving, that flickering radiance was, yes, water, the surface of water. Coming from deep beneath the Void which we thought had no bottom, along with another loud sound, a large amount of water was rising in the pit. The still falling ice sank into the surface then immediately melted, becoming part of the water.

"Ah.....above!"

Sinon said as her mouth still held the stem of mint while pointing her right hand upward.

My sight followed her lead by reflex, once again, an unbelievable scene happened before my eyes.

The roots of the world tree, which had withered back toward the ceiling, had been released after the vanishing of Þrymheimr, they made a big twist while growing in thickness, as if they were a living creatures. They gathered together and rushed downward as if they were seeking something. It was like a giant had thrown down a pile of wood. In front of us who were watching wordlessly, the roots of world tree had reached and sank down into the surface of the pure water of what was once the Great Void, causing a big wave from it spread out. The mesh of roots covered the wide surface of water immediately until its tips reached the shore.

That scene had two things in common with the illusory scene Queen Urðr had shown us. The world tree that had stopped its movement had its roots, or rather its trunks extended from its gigantic figure, I felt some kind of strong wave being emitted. It was a pure delight, like a traveller who had

wandered for a long time in the intense heat of a desert finally putting his mouth in the oasis he had arrived at.

"Look....., the sprouts from the roots..."

I focused my eyes due to Asuna's whisper, sure enough, from all directions around the roots, small sprouts —— of course the sprouts were as big as us, but they were small when compared to the giant tree —— had shot up, and yellow-green leaves spread one after another.

The wind blew.

Unlike the bone freezing cold wind that had endlessly and violently swept over Jötunheimr field up until now, it was a warm spring breeze. At the same time, the intensity of the light in the entire world had increased many fold. I looked up to the sky again, the group of crystals which had been shining dimly were emitting strong white light, each one of them was like a small sun.

The wind and sunlight stroked the ice covering the large field and the thick ice covering small rivers, causing them to melt in succession. Below them, new green leaves sprouted from the black and damp soil. The castles and fortresses in various places that the humanoid evil-gods had constructed were immediately covered in green and decayed away——

"Kuooooo———n....."

Suddenly, Tonkii raised its eight wings, wide ears, and nose, then released a loud howl.

Several seconds later, from various places on the field, Oo-n, Kuooo-n echoes like those came back in reply. Appearing from various fountains and rivers, and of course from the huge lake that the world tree roots had spread over, were beings with manjū-like bodies and long tentacles, the elephant-jellyfish type evil-gods. It wasn't just that, the many legs alligator type, the two-headed leopard type, many types of the beast evil-gods appeared endlessly on the ground and water's surface, and the field began to swagger.

No, on this beautiful green field, they were no longer «Evil-gods». They were the peaceful dwellers in this breeze, greenery, and the sunlight —— aside from their size. Those who were bullying them harshly, the humanoid evil-gods couldn't be found no matter where I looked for them.

Tonkii had lowered its altitude a great deal before I had noticed, visible here and there on the wilderness were small dots of raid parties standing stunned. Looking at them, they might be wondering what had happened. Having taken the quest from the NPC «Archduke Þjazi», and right before they could attain the fruit of their long struggle, their giant companions had disappeared and the field had completely changed, so it was normal to be confused.

This was just what Klein had said after we heard about the quest from Urðr, as we would have to explain in full details to the «MMO Tomorrow» journalist who also served as the information shop for those stunned raid party members; I'd be glad to entrust the duty to him as he wished — While I was thinking about those irresponsible things, Leafa suddenly sat down.

Stroking the free flowing white hair on Tonkii's wide back, she whispered, ".....It's great. Really great, Tonkii. Look, so many of your friends. Right there..... and also over there, so many....."

Seeing spilling drops of water on her cheeks, even a block head like myself felt something well up in my chest. Immediately Silica embraced Leafa before starting to cry uncontrollably, Asuna and Lis also wiped their eyes. Folding his arms, Klein faced the other way to hide his face, even Sinon repeatedly blinked many times.

Lastly, Yui took off my head and landed on Asuna shoulder before burying her face in her hair. That girl doesn't let me see her crying face anymore, I wonder who she learned something like that from.....

Then, at that moment. I heard a voice.

"I appreciate your excellent accomplishment."

I turned my startled face to the front.

Over Tonkii's big head, a figure wrapped in golden light was floating.

It shouldn't have been more than two hours, but I already felt it was a nostalgic figure, it was, no doubt, the golden haired beauty with the three meter tall body, who had gave us this quest, the «Queen of the Lake Urðr».

However, she wasn't transparent anymore, this time she clearly had substance. So, she could come out from the fountain she was forced to hide in order to escape Þrym's hand. The pearly scales visible on her limbs, the tip of her swaying fin shaped hair, along with the light-green long dress covered her body, all glittered dazzlingly under the sunlight.

The turquoise pupils gently narrowed, before Urðr opened her lips again.

"By removing «The sword which cut all of steel and tree» Excaliber, the «Spirit Roots» which had been severed from Yggdrasil could return to their original mother. With the blessings from the tree filling the land once more, Jötunheimr had returned to what it once was. For all these, Ye have my thanks."

"No.....well. For Þrym, without the help from Þórr, I don't think we could defeat him....."

Urðr nodded her head to what I said.

"I know the power of the Thunder God. However.....be careful, Ye Fairies. Even though those æsir are the enemy of the frost giants, they would never be your ally....."

"Erm..... Þrym himself said the same thing, what does that mean.....?"

Leafa asked after she stood up and wiped her tears. But the Cardinal's automatic response engine didn't recognize that vague question, while Urðr remained silent, her floating figure raised up a little.

"——My sisters also would like to give you their appreciations."

Together with her words, the right side of Urðr began to vibrate like a water's surface, then a figure appeared.

Its height was slightly shorter than the elder sister —— but even so, from our perspective, we still had to look up to her. Her hair was of the same gold color but a little shorter. Her long dress was deep blue. Her face, if Urðr was «high class» then her face would be «elegance».

"My name is «Verðandi».^[11] Thank you, the fairy warriors. Being able to see the green Jötunheimr once again, Ah, this is like a dream....."

As she whispered in a sweet voice, Verðandi softly waved her right hand. At the same time, various items and Yrd currency roughly dropped in front of us before disappearing into our temporary storage. Its capacity was

suitable for the seven people party, however, I felt it would reach its limit soon.

And in addition, a whirlwind occurred to the left of Urðr, and a third silhouette came into view.

Contrasting Verðandi in appearance, it was a figure wearing armor and a helmet. Stretching from both sides of the helmet and boots were long wings. The golden hair was tied finely, the beautiful and brave face shook to the side.

And on this third person, there was a surprising feature. She was the size of a human, no, a fairy, about half as tall as her eldest sister Urðr. Klein made a strange gulping sound from his throat.

"My name is «Skuld»! You have my thanks, warriors!"

She made a short exclamation in a cold and dignified voice, and like her sister, held up her big hand. Once again, a waterfall of reward items occurred. The message area on the right most of my vision finally appeared the blinking 'reaching full capacity' warning.

As the two sisters stepped back, Urðr stepped forward once again. If Urðr gave a similar amount of reward, there was no doubt the storage would overflow. In that case, the remaining items would turn into the arbitrary objects piled up on Tonkii's back — However, was it good to say it was fortunate? Urðr smiled at me before began speaking,

"——From me, I would be bestowing that sword upon you. But, never throw it into «Urðr's Spring»."

"Y-Yes, I won't."

As I nodded like a child——

The golden long sword I had held tight in both hands, the legendary weapon «Holy Sword Excaliber»'s shape had disappeared. Of course, it was put into my personal storage. At this point I wanted to shout "I got it!!!!!" but as I was no longer a kid, please forgive me for only grasping my right hand in that moment.

The three maidens floated up a little and said in unison.

"Thank you, Fairies. Let us meet again."

At the same time, in the center of my vision, a system message in an elaborated font appeared. As the 'Quest Cleared' message faded, the three bodies began to leave.

Klein suddenly jumped in front and shouted,

"S, S-S-Skuld-san! Your contact address!"

———You, what about Freyja-san!?

———and how is an NPC supposed to have a mail address!?

As I was standing upright, considering which one I should say to him——

Which one should I say?

The two sisters had already disappeared distantly, but the sister of the future Skuld-san turned around, it may have been my imagination, but I saw her make an amused expression, then waved her hand again. Something glittering flowed through the air and dropped into Klein's hand.

Immediately after that, the goddess of war also vanished, leaving just silence and a gentle breeze.

Before long, Lisbeth shook her head slightly before whispering,

"Klein. Now you have my respect from the bottom of my heart."

Agreed. Really, I completely agreed.

Anyway——

Our sudden adventure on the morning of 28th December 2025 concluded like this around noon.

".....Well, how about the year-end party after this?"

As I proposed; Asuna, even though looked a little tired, smiled and said,

"I agree."

"I agree too!"

From her shoulder, Yui raised her right hand up straight.

Part 6

I was a little worried as I decided whether to hold the unexpected year-end party in the room Asuna and I shared in Yggdrasil City, or to gather in the real world.

If it was in ALO, Yui, who played an active role in this quest, would be able to fully participate in the party. But Asuna had to go to Kyoto to visit the head house on her father's side for a week, starting from the 29th, so if we missed meeting today, I wouldn't have another chance to meet her until after the year ends.

As Yui, my daughter, said "Real!" after I asked for her opinion, the year-end party would be held from 3:00PM at the café in the Taito district of Okachimachi, the «Dicey Café». We waved farewell to Tonkii after it sent us back up to the tree stairs, and once we reached the central capital Alne, which was still crowded, like before the quest — even though when Prymheimr started ascending it caused some slight vibration — there, we logged out.

The first thing I did after opening my eyes on my bed in the real world was to call Agil to make a reservation, and although he complained "Suddenly asking like this, I won't have time to prepare the special ingredients.", but by the time we arrived, there would be plenty of the shop's special menu's 'spare ribs' and 'baked beans', he was such an ideal businessman.

The weather forecast said there would be snow in the evening, so Suguha and I had to use the train to reach the interior of Tokyo instead of my bike. Also, this time we had luggage which were quite large, and it wouldn't fit in my clunky 125cc's narrow helmet compartment anyway.

Speaking of Kawagoe city in the Saitama prefecture, to Klein who lived in Tokyo, he would make a face as if it were located at the edge of the world, but it didn't even take an hour on the Tojo express line to reach Okachimachi. It was past 2PM when we opened the door of Dicey Café, and only Sinon, who had arrived earlier due to her house being extremely nearby, was there.

After I greeted the shopkeeper who was busy preparing food, I opened the hard case I brought. It contained four cameras with movable lenses, and a notebook PC for controlling them.

".....What are these?"

Frowning, Sinon asked, while Suguha helped to install the cameras at the four corners of the shop. They were the mass market web cameras with built-in microphones, but I had remodeled them to have high capacity battery and wireless connection, these four were enough to fully cover the entire room without having to worry about the location of each camera.

Once the cameras were recognized by the notebook PC, I confirmed their movements, then connected them to the high spec stationary machine in my house in Kawagoe. I put on the small head set, then spoke,

"How's it, Yui?"

『.....I can see. I can see clearly, and I hear you, Papa!』

The lovely voice of Yui resounded from both my earphones and the PC speaker.

"OK, try moving slowly first."

『Yes!』

After her reply, the small diameter lens of the closest camera started moving.

Currently Yui should be flying like a little fairy in the pseudo-3D reflection of the Dicey Café. Although the image quality was low and the response time was also bad, she would have much more freedom compared to the passive image from the mobile terminal's camera up until now.

".....I see, so those cameras and microphones are like Yui's terminal's..... sensory organs, right?"

I said nothing to Sinon's words, while Suguha nodded,

"Yeah. Onii-chan learned that at school, mecha..... mechatoni....."

"Mechatronics.", that, was me.

"You take that nics course and made these stuff, all just for Yui-chan, right?"

『It was an order from me!』

Ahaha, three people laughed together while sipping their usual hot ginger ale.

"I-It wasn't just that! Once the camera is more compact, I can attach it to my shoulder or head and bring it anywhere with me....."

"Isn't that also for Yui?"

Really, there was no way I could object to that.

However, this temporarily named «Audio-visual two-way communication probe» system was still far from complete. In order for Yui to be able to realize the real world like the virtual world, the automatic movement function of the terminal camera and microphones was a requirement, and the sensors were also not enough. Ideally speaking, it would be best to use a self-propelled human type. Of course I couldn't make it using the equipment from high school, is there any aggressive mechanics-san somewhere out there making a beautiful girl robot.....?

While my honest delusion unfolded; Asuna, Klein, Lis, and Silica assembled in that order, while food and drinks were lined up on the two tables which were stuck together. When Agil brought out the spare ribs served on big shining plates, all the members clapped at the shopkeeper. He then took off his apron and sat down, and both non-alcoholic and real champagne were poured into glasses——

"Congratulations for obtaining the «Holy Sword Excaliber» and «Thunder Hammer Mjölnir»! Thanks for the good work in 2025! ——Cheers!"

Everyone said in a big chorus after my lead.

"..... Anyway,"

Sinon, who sat on my right, murmured after around one and a half hours, when the feast on the table was almost settled.

"Why was it «Excaliber»?"

"Heh? What do you mean?"

As I tilted my head trying to understand what her question meant, Sinon supplemented while spinning the fork skillfully at the tip of her finger.

"Normally..... it's usually «calibur» in other fantasy novels or manga, right? As in, «Excalibur»."

"A.....Ahh, is that so?"

"Heh, Sinon-san also read those kinds of novels?"

Suguha, who was on the opposite side, asked. Sinon made an awkward smile before replying,

"I was head librarian during middle school. I had read several books about the legend of the King Arthur, I have the feeling that they all used «calibur»."

"Hmmm, maybe it is another thing which was set on the whims of the ALO item set designer.....?"

I made an emotionless response, and Asuna who sat on my left made a bitter smile and said,

"It's certainly based on the legend, just like the fake reward from the earlier quest, wasn't «Caliburn» also one of them?"

Then, a clear voice of Yui replied from the speakers atop the table.

『The main ones are «Caledfwlch», «Caliburnus», «Calibor», «Collbrande», «Caliburn», «Escalibor», and more.』

"Uwa, so many..."

I was amazed, while I was thinking «calibur» and «caliber» seemed to be a mistake, Sinon continued,^[12]

"Well, it might not be a big deal..... but when saying «caliber», I'm a bit anxious because I've heard of its other meaning."

"Heh, what is it?"

"A gun's barrel diameter, written as «caliber» in English, for example, my Hecate II's 50 barrel diameter is called «fifty caliber». I realized this after seeing the difference in Excaliber's spelling."

Sinon closed her mouth for a moment, then glanced at me before continuing,

".....Then, it turned out to also have another meaning, «A man's capacity». «A man of high caliber» means «A man who has high capacity» or «A man with high capability»."

"Hehh—, I need to remember that....."

Suguha said in admiration, Sinon then said, "Perhaps it won't come out in the exams though." and smiled.

Then, I didn't know when she heard about it, but Lisbeth on the opposite side of the table grinned and said,

"That means we can't call the Excaliber owner a cheapskate. And I heard a rumor, that recently a certain someone did a part-time job and earned quite a bit...—"

"Uu....."

It was just yesterday that Kikuoka from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications had deposited the cost for assisting in the investigation of the «Death Gun Incident». But it was already spent on various upgrading of parts of Yui's stationary machine — then Suguha's nanocarbon shinai — was also already pre-ordered, so the balance was immediately in a desolate state.

But I couldn't pull back here right after I heard about caliber. I slapped my chest before declaring,

"O-Of course, I've decided from the start that today's party is my treat."

Right after that, the loud sound of applause came from all directions, along with Klein's whistle.

As I raised my hand in response, I started thinking in my mind,

If I learnt anything about the human's capability through the experience from the three worlds: SAO, ALO, GGO, it would be just one, «Nothing can be shouldered alone».

No matter in which world, there were many times I was about to be crushed, but somehow managed to continue walking forward with the help of many people. The development of today's sudden adventure was also a sign of it, wasn't it?

So surely, my — no, everyone's «caliber» was the point inside the full circle made by all my companions holding hands together.

That golden sword was to never be used for my personal gain.

While I decided that in my mind, in order to toast with everyone again, I reached my hand toward the glass on the table.

(END)

First Day

Aincrad First Floor

November 2022

Death game.

It was not a phrase with a precise definition. If it were to be considered a «match involving bodily risks», then it would include martial arts, rock climbing and such, and even motor sports. What separates those dangerous sports from death games is probably just one condition.

That is, having the penalty of death, listed as one of the rules.

Not as the result of an accidental incident. A coerced death, served as the consequence of the player's mistakes and defeat, or punishment for the violation of rules and other reasons. In short, murder.

With this premise established, the VRMMORPG which became the world's first, «Sword Art Online», had now unmistakably become a death game. The game's developer, and as such, the ruler, Kayaba Akihiko, had personally made that clear declaration without the slightest hint of doubt, a mere twenty minutes ago.

That if your HP were to reach zero—that is, on «defeat», you would be killed. Or if the Nerve Gear were to be removed—that is, to «violate the rules», you would also be killed.

It didn't feel real. Not that it should have. Countless suspicions still swirled about my mind, even now.

—Is something like that possible? After all, it merely used «a game machine fit for households», the Nerve Gear; could it have the ability to destroy the cerebrum of human beings?

—In the first place, why do something like this? Holding players hostage in a virtual world, if a ransom was at stake, then it would still make sense. However, putting the lives of players at stake for the clearing of the game, that would serve absolutely no tangible benefit for Kayaba. On the contrary, it would make him lose all the reputation he had as a game designer and quantum physicist, degrading him into the worst criminal recorded in history.

I don't get it. I can't make any reasonable sense of it.

But at the same time, my instincts understood.

Kayaba's proclamation was completely true. The nature of the stage where SAO takes place, the Floating Castle Aincrad, had changed from a parallel world overflowing with passion and excitement, into a cage of death trapping ten thousand people within. The words uttered by Kayaba at the end of his tutorial earlier—[This situation itself, was my final goal]; that phrase was likely his absolute true intentions. That outrageous genius had, merely for the sake of realizing this death game, created SAO... and thus, the Nerve Gear.

Due to that belief, I—the level 1 swordsman, Kirito, am presently running with my life at stake.

All by myself, in the middle of the vast grasslands. Abandoning the first friend I made in this world.

All to keep myself alive.

The Floating Castle Aincrad was formed by floors, reaching up to a hundred, narrowly piled atop each other.

As the floors were wide in the lower portion and narrowed as they approached the upper portion, the entire castle took the shape of a cone. The diameter of the thus widest first floor amounted to up to ten kilometers. The «main city area», in other words, the largest city of the first floor, «Starting City», reached out in a semi-circle with a diameter of one kilometer on the southern tip of the floor.

Tall castle walls had been built up along the edges of the city, reducing the chances of monsters invading to an absolute zero. Also, the insides of the city were guarded by the «Anti-Criminal Code», making it impossible for your HP, that became the actual amount of life you had remaining, to fall by even a single pixel. To put it in other words, if you were to stay within the Starting City, then your safety would be ensured, eliminating the chance of death.

However, I decided to exit the city the moment Kayaba Akihito ended that initial tutorial.

There were several reasons. The lack of confidence in the «Code» continuing forever. The desire to avoid the discord and mistrust that would

surely be born between players. And also, the tenacity to level up of an MMO gamer, ingrained in my very core.

This might be some sort of fate; I do have a considerable liking for death game themes in fiction, and had gone through many novels, comics, movies and such from all over. Of course, the games I have, tend to cover a large variety of themes, but I believe it to be a common theme existing within them.

In regards to death games, it was always a trade-off between «safety» and «progress». If the starting location is a safe area, there would be no danger to one's life if one were to remain there. But if one were to shrink away from danger before even trying to brave through it, it would become impossible to overcome the situation.

Of course, there was no way I had any heroic aspirations of cutting down those hundred boss monsters with my own sword, so as to clear this game. However, within the ten thousand players imprisoned, the portion of them possessing that mentality was probably not limited to only a small amount—there should be a thousand such people at the very least. Sooner or later, they would leave the city, hunt down the weak monsters in the area, and begin to earn experience points, whether as solo or group players. To increase their levels, upgrade their equipment, and get stronger.

And with that, there's another problem.

In a death game, what opposes players is not limited to rules, traps, and monsters. They would find enemies in other players as well. I am unaware of any death games that did not turn out so.

In this SAO, when outside of towns, that is, when «outside the boundary», PK'ing is possible. That said, although it's unlikely for them to go to the extent of murder—that would result in them becoming a true murderer, after all—resorting to threatening others with weapons to steal away items, I unfortunately have not the confidence to say that not a single such individual exists. Just by imagining the possibility of some certain person with stats overwhelming my own becoming my enemy results in tangible fear and terror, leaving a bitter taste in my mouth.

And based on those reasons—

The choice of staying in the Starting City, abandoning the strengthening of myself for safety, offered no advantage to me.

Thus, if I were to aim to level up, there was no time to stand around idly. The relatively safe grassy fields around the city would likely soon be filled with «those who decided to venture forth», like myself. The monster POP of SAO was fixed to a certain amount within a certain time frame for each area. After the initial targets were hunted down, it would become a frenzy to search for the next POP, and from then on, occasionally stealing targets from others would likely become unavoidable.

To avoid that, for the purpose of having an effective rate of leveling, it is necessary to aim beyond the «relatively safe» area—that is, the «slightly dangerous» area.

Of course, in a game that one had just started, if one did not have any sense of direction, doing that would be tantamount to suicide. However, due to a certain reason, although it only applies to the lower floors, I am familiar with many things - such as the topography, and even the monsters that appear in this game, SAO, which officially went online today.

Exiting from the northwest gate of the Starting City, cutting straight through the vast grasslands, after escaping from a path similar to a maze within the deep forest, there is a village named, «Horunka». It may be small, but it certainly had an inn, a weapon shop and a tool shop «within the boundary», making it sufficient to serve as a hunting base. In the surrounding forest, there is no POP of monsters with dangerous skills that involve paralyzing toxins or equipment destruction, so it would be unlikely to die by accident even through solo play.

With the village of Horunka as my base, I will raise my level from 1 to 5 throughout today. The current time was six-fifteen in the afternoon. The surrounding grasslands were dyed golden in the setting sun from the outer circumference of Aincrad, and the forest opposite was bathed in a pale blue by the dusk. But luckily, even at night, strong monsters would not spawn around Horunka. If I continued hunting nonstop until the next change of day, I would probably be able to gain enough stats and equipment to head for the next location before the village is filled with other players.

"...Selfishness is a good point too, huh... I'm the very image of a solo player, geez..."

As I ran with all my might, that was first thing I whispered as I left the city.

If I did not express that in a humorous tone, then the fear and that other bitterness—self-hatred, threatening to force itself out from my mouth, would have no chance of being erased.

If only that well-natured cutlass user were by my side. Aiding with his leveling up, in addition to ensuring his survival; that moral action would probably be able to overwrite some of these feelings of guilt.

But I have deserted my only friend in this world, the one named Klein, at the Starting City. To be accurate, when I invited him to head towards Horunka together, Klein mentioned that he couldn't leave behind the comrades who were in the same guild as him in a previous game.

Then let's go with them, too. That proposal might have been possible as well. However, I didn't suggest it. Unlike the grasslands where only wild boars or caterpillars that could be easily defeated, even at level 1, appeared, the forest beyond had somewhat dangerous types of monsters spawning, such as poisonous bees and predatory plants. If the wrong response were made towards those special attacks, it would cause your HP to drop to zero in a flash... in other words, one might even end up dying.

The chances of Klein's friends ending up dead— no, the gaze Klein would give me the moment that happens— that was what I was afraid of. I didn't wish to have any unpleasant thoughts, I didn't want to be hurt; with that belief and nothing else in my mind, I abandoned the one who called out to me, and who invited me to play as a party for the first time in this world...

"...!!!"

Emotions of disgust, unable to be covered up by even my self-torturing monologue, swelled up from the bottom of my mind, and I gritted my teeth, forcing my right hand onto the sword equipped onto my back.

In a clump of bushes slightly ahead, a single blue wild boar POP-ed. They were non-aggressive monsters, so I planned to ignore them all until I got through the grasslands, but out of impulse, I unsheathed the simple straight sword from my initial equipment, starting the motion for the single hit sword skill, «Slant».

Reacting to being targeted, the wild boar glared at me, and violently tore at the ground with its right foreleg. The motion for a charge attack. If I were to falter here, stopping my skill, I would end up receiving a large amount of damage instead. With mixed feelings of calmness and irritation towards

myself, I stared at the monster, letting loose my skill while aiming at its weak point, the back of its head.

The sword blade faintly glowed light blue, and along with a sharp sound effect, my virtual body moved, half by its own accord. The system assist, unique to sword skills, was forcibly correcting the slashing motion. While taking care not to go against the movement, I consciously accelerated my leg and right arm, increasing the power of the skill. For the sake of mastering this skill alone, I once spent close to ten days using the skill for empty attacks on the practice dummies in the town.

The stats of a level 1 along with the specifications of the initial equipment was obviously extremely weak, but still, if a boosted «Slant» were to deal a critical hit at the weak point of the blue wild boar—its official name, «Frenzy Boar», the HP reduced in a single hit would be just a little more than what it has. The slash that I released head-on struck the mane area of the wild boar that came charging in, returning a strong recoil, and the beast with a total length of around a meter, twenty centimeters was violently sent flying backwards.

"Giiiiiii!"

Screaming as it bounced off the ground, it stopped in the air unnaturally. *Bashaa!* An intense sound effect, along with a light effect. Within the blue light, the wild boar turned into thousands of polygon fragments, before exploding.

I didn't even spare a look at the indication of the experience points added, or the dropped material items; on the contrary, without even stopping my feet, I walked right through the drifting light effect. I didn't feel even a fraction more refreshed. Plunging the sword into the scabbard on my back with vigor, I faced the dark forest I was finally nearing, and I continued running at the speed limit allowed by my agility stat.

Nevertheless, I had to take caution in the forest to avoid the reaction radius of the monsters about, but still I ran down the path as fast as I could and reached my destination, «Horunka Village», just before the setting sun went down.

I quickly surveyed the village of ten buildings, including both private houses and shops, from its entrance. The color cursors floating in my vision were all tagged as NPC's. It seems that I am the first to arrive, but

thinking about it, that was only to be expected. After all, I did dash off at full speed with barely any conversation the moment Kayaba's tutorial ended.

First would be to head for the weapon shop facing the narrow plaza. Before the start of the tutorial—that is, when SAO was still a normal game, I hunted down several monsters along with Klein, so there were a number of raw material items saved up in my storage. I had no desire to increase my production-type skills, so I would just sell them off to the shopkeeper NPC. Using nearly all of my gold, which had just recently increased, I bought a brown leather half coat with decently high defense.

I touched the instant equip button displayed when I purchased it without any hint of hesitation. Above the white linen shirt and thick grey cloth vest that comprised my initial equipment, a leather piece of equipment that exuded a feeling of durability came into being, releasing light. I caught my breath for a bit, dwelling in the slightly increased sense of stability, then glanced at the large full-length mirror installed onto the weapon shop's wall.

"...It's... me..."

I unconsciously muttered, and the elderly shopkeeper polishing a dagger's scabbard at the counter raised his eyebrows, before returning to work straight away.

The avatar reflected in the mirror, aside from the height and gender, was a far cry from the «Kirito» that I went to great pains to create.

The body was thin and slender, without a trace of masculinity in the facial features. Long black forelocks hung down. The eyes, too, were black, or darker than that. An appearance just like mine in reality, reproduced with an astonishing level of detail—

Just from imagining this avatar, what the previous Kirito wore, equipping dazzling metal armor, a vehement spasm of denial surged through my entire body. Luckily, in SAO, even with lightweight leather equipment, speed-type one-handed sword users were able to attain sufficient defense. Of course, they were unable to become tanks, the ones who could draw monsters' attention to themselves, but there was no need for a tank-type build for a solo player.

From now on, I shall stick to leather equipment as long as the situation allows it. Not to mention those that are as plain-looking as possible.

Deciding thus in my mind, I departed the weapon shop. The only thing that improved was the Leather Coat. With the Buckler set aside for now, my weapon still remained the initial sword. Rushing into the tool shop next door, I bought as many recovery and antidote potions as I could, turning the money in my possession to an absolute zero.

There was a reason behind why I didn't have my weapon replaced. The one and only one-handed straight sword sold in the weapon shop of this village, «Bronze Sword», had more power than the initial equipment, «Small Sword», but its durability dropped easily, and it was weak against the corrosive liquid fired from plant monsters as well. If one were to face them frequently, staying with the Small Sword was the better choice. That being said, it's not like I could keep using the weak initial sword forever. Leaving the tool shop, I flew into a private house deeper in the village with a dash.

Stirring a pot in the kitchen, an NPC that truly gave the impression of a «Village Missus» turned to look at me and spoke.

"Good evening, journeying swordsman. You must be tired, I do wish to offer you some food, but I do not have any at the moment. All I can give, is a single cup of water or so."

Without missing a beat I answered, enunciating clearly so that the system could recognize it.

"That will be fine."

Actually, a mere "That's fine" or "Yes" would have been enough, but these things were for setting the mood. But, if I were to say the even more polite phrase, "Don't mind me", nothing would happen.

The NPC poured water into an old-looking cup from a water jug, and set it down on the table before me with a clunk. Sitting on the chair, I drank that down in a gulp.

With a slight smile, the missus turned back towards the pot. Despite something simmering, «not giving any food» was meant to be a slight hint. Upon waiting further, the steady sound of a child's coughing could soon be heard from the other side of the door to the next room. The missus's shoulders seemed to fall in despair.

After waiting a few more seconds, a golden question mark finally lit up above the lady's head. The sign of a quest's activation. I called out without a moment's delay.

"Is something troubling you?"

It was one of many possible phrases used to accept quests from NPCs. Softly turning to face me, the «?» mark atop the missus's head blinked constantly.

"Actually, journeying swordsman, my daughter..."

—And her daughter was stricken with a severe illness that was completely unfazed even when treated with medicine from the market (this was inside the pot) and there was no other way to cure her daughter aside from having her drink medicine procured from the ovules of predatory plants inhabiting the forest further to the west. The problem was, plants of that particular type were extremely dangerous; moreover, those that actually bloomed were rarely seen, resulting in her complete inability to obtain any. Thus, if only a swordsman was able retrieve it in her stead she would gladly offer a long sword handed down in her family as an expression of gratitude.

Which is the general synopsis of the missus's speech that she gave while gesturing, as I listened on patiently. The quest would not progress if not heard to the end, and I was unable to bring myself to harden my heart against the sporadic dry coughs of her daughter during her story.

The missus finally closed her mouth, and the tasks on the quest log displayed on the left of my vision were refreshed. I stood up, and crying out, "Please leave it to me!" —a line that was unnecessary, but it was to set the mood— I rushed out of the house.

Immediately afterwards, the time bell melody played throughout the town from the small watchtower in the middle of the plaza. Evening, seven o'clock.

Just what is the situation in the real world now? Doubtless, a huge uproar had occurred. Beside me lying down on my bed in my room with the Nerve Gear on my head, were probably the figures of my mother or sister, or perhaps both.

I wonder just what they are feeling right now. Shock? Doubt? Fear? Or maybe grief...?

However, the fact that I am still alive here, within Aincrad, is proof that my mother and sister have not forcibly torn off my Nerve Gear. In other words, they probably do believe in it. In Kayaba Akihiko's warning —and that I would return alive.

In order to survive this death game and return, there is no choice but for someone to break through to the top floor of this Floating Castle Aincrad that reaches up to roughly a hundred levels and defeat that monstrous last boss of a form that I can't even begin to imagine, to clear the game.

Of course, I don't even have a single thought of achieving that deed myself. What I should be doing, no, the one and only thing I am capable of: is to struggle for my life with all my might, that's all there is.

First of all, to become strong. At the very least, on this floor, regardless of the type and numbers of monsters coming at me... or perhaps to the point where I can protect my own life even when a malicious player assaults me. Anything beyond that, I can think about when the time comes.

"...Sorry, mother. For making you worry... Sorry, Sugu. For having something like this happen through the very VR games you hate..."

The words that unintentionally sprang from my lips caused me slight surprise. The last time I called out my sister's name in short-form was three years ago, or maybe even before that.

If— If I live on and return, I'll face her directly and call her «Sugu» once more.

Deciding so listlessly, I passed through the village's gate, striding towards the forest covered in the ominous night.

There is no sky within Aincrad. In its place, the bottom of the next floor stretching out for a hundred meters overhead is all. Thus, the only times that the Sun could be seen directly were restricted to the mornings and evenings. Of course, the Moon follows suit.

Even then, it's not as if daytime is dim with the night pitch being black. Area lighting is applied similar to other common VR spaces, ensuring there is ample gamma. Even in the forest at night, while obviously not to the level of day, a pale blue light illuminates all the way to one's feet, posing no inconvenience even when running.

Despite that, but the gloom in one's heart is another matter all together. Regardless of how much attention is paid to one's surroundings, the anxiety that something could be right behind still floats up every so often. It was only at times like this that I start to miss the sense of security from playing as a party, but I was beyond the point of no return. Both in terms of distance, as well as what the system dictated.

The number of «skill slots» allocated to a level 1 player was a mere two.

One of those slots I filled with «One-handed Sword» right after the start of the game at one o'clock in the afternoon today, and intended to consider carefully what to put in the other empty slot. However, after experiencing that nightmarish tutorial and leaving the Starting City behind, the chance to mess around with skills had been robbed from me.

For solo players, there are several indispensable skills. Among those, the most important ones are «Searching» and «Hiding». Each one of those two can increase the rate of survival. However, the former can also increase the efficiency of hunting, while the latter's efficiency falls slightly in this forest, due to a certain reason. As such, I chose the searching skill, deciding to add the hiding skill on my next slot increment.

That said, those skills were not focused on much, since manpower already increases the degree of safety—that is, the same effect could be achieved through sight by spreading out the searching range when playing as a party. In other words, the moment I took up «Searching», I had already chosen to forfeit all paths other than the one where I rush straight through as a solo player. At some point this decision might come back to haunt me, but at the very least, it wouldn't right now...

Within my vision, as I walked while thinking of such things in a corner of my mind, a small colored cursor was displayed. The reaction range was enlarged due to the searching skill; hence, I was still unable to confirm it by sight. The cursor was of the red that denoted a monster, but it had a slightly dark hue, perhaps closer to magenta, rather than red.

This reddish shade could be used to loosely determine the relative strength of the enemy. The cursors of the monsters that one cannot defeat no matter much one struggles, those with an overwhelming disparity in levels, were a dark crimson, more intense than blood. Most of those weak monsters, from which scarcely any experience points can be gained no matter how many one kills, are a light pink, close to white. Suitable enemies of equal levels are depicted as pure red.

Presently, the cursor appearing within my vision is a red, slightly more intense than average. The name of the monster is «Little Nepent». Despite having little attached to its name, it is a walking predatory plant with a stature of a meter and a half. It was level 3, hence the cursor seen by the level 1 me was colored purple.

Although it wasn't an opponent to be made light of, there was no need for fear either. That is due to the narrow yellow border surrounding the cursor, indicating that it is the target mob for a quest.

I stopped walking for a moment, and after confirming the absence of other mobs in the vicinity, I turned to the Little Nepent once again and dashed in head-on. Rear attacks are rarely effective on monsters without eyes, such as this.

Stepping off the small path, I circled around a grand, old tree and the monster's form entered my sight.

On its lower body that brings to mind the *Nepenthes* species, countless roots were writhing about as it used them to move. Vines, with pointed leaves attached, twisted about at its side and it had a «mouth» for consumption of prey near where its head should have been, dribbling a viscous liquid as it snapped open and shut.

"...A miss."

Having seen that much, I murmured softly. Occasionally, one with a large flower blooming atop its mouth would appear. The key item needed for the quest received at Horunka Village, «Little Nepent's Ovule», drops from none other than a Nepent with that flower attached. And the rate of one with the flower appearing is likely less than one percent.

However, even if they are normal Nepents, as long as one continues defeating them, the appearance rate of one with a flower will increase. As such, engaging it in battle is not a waste, but there is an important point that cannot be ignored.

It is that, at a rate similar to one with a flower, a type of Nepent with a round fruit attached might appear. That one could be said to be a «trap». If the fruit is struck in the midst of battle, it will break off with a deafening sound, emitting fumes with an unpleasant odor. The fumes possess neither poisonous nor corrosive properties, but it has the extremely troublesome characteristic of rallying together its fellow Nepents from the surroundings. Not many would be summoned if the POP of the area was running low, but

given the current circumstances, an obviously immeasurable amount would be gathered together.

I focused my eyes again, and upon confirming a lack of fruit on the enemy, I drew the sword on my back once more. The Nepent noticed me at the same time, raising its two vines up high threateningly.

The attack pattern for this mob includes the use of the pointed edge of its ivy to slash and stab, like a dagger, and the disgorgement of corrosive fluids from its mouth. It has much more variety compared to the blue wild boar that simply charged recklessly, but as it doesn't use sword skills, it could be said to be easier than the demi-human mobs such as Kobolds and Goblins.

And above all, its ability leans a fair amount towards the offensive side, with its defense weak. Even in «the previous Aincrad», I was fond of these types of monsters. After all, as long as you don't receive any of the attacks, it is possible to take down several of them within a short time.

"Shuuuuu!"

And with that howl spilling out from its prey-trapping mechanism of a mouth, the Nepent thrust its right vine towards me. Reading its trajectory in an instant, I jumped towards the left to dodge it. Turning towards its side in the same motion, I drove my sword into the part joining the pitcher portion and its thick stalk —its weak point.

It was a decent counter. The Nepent's HP bar slumped, with more than a twenty percent decrease.

Letting out a voice of anger once again, the plant inflated its pitcher. The startup animation for the firing of the corrosive fluids. The range was as long as five meters. It was impossible to dodge even when retreating straight backwards.

Aside from HP damage and a drastic drop in equipment durability, thanks to its viscosity, the player's movement will also be obstructed. However, the effect is limited to a narrow angle of 30 degrees in front. After determining the timing to do so until the very last moment, the instant the expansion of the pitcher portion of its body stopped, I jumped with all my might towards the right this time.

A pale green fluid shot out in a spray with a *Bushuu!*, forming a white vapor as it fell onto the ground. But having avoided getting even a single

drop showered on me, I touched down onto the ground with my right foot and brandished my sword, dealing a hard blow to the same weak point once again. With a scream, the Nepent's prey-trapping mechanism bent backwards as a yellow light effect encircled it. A stunned status. It might be strange for a plant to be stunned, but there was no way I could let this chance slip.

Once again, I forcefully pulled my sword towards the right. With that movement done in an instant, the sword skill activated, engulfing the blade in a faint, pale blue light.

"...Raa!"

In this battle— or perhaps for the first time since SAO officially went online, a yell welled out of me, and I violently kicked off from the ground. The single-hit, horizontal offensive technique to the neck, «Horizontal». The only thing about it that differs from «Slant», is whether it's slanted or horizontal, but this way made it easier to aim for the Little Nepent's weak point.

Right before the plant mob recovered from its stun, with close to fifty percent of its HP lost to the earlier two attacks, its exposed stalk was given a straight slash by the sword skill. Of course, I was boosting the force to its maximum with the movement from my kicking foot and right arm. Glowing with a light effect the sword blade cut into the tough stalk, facing what resistance remained for a moment—

"Sukaan!", as that groan sounded out, the pitcher portion was sliced from the stalk, flying off in mid-air by itself. What remained of the gauge was dyed in deep red, vanishing from the right side. As it reached zero, the Little Nepent's large form was frozen in blue. And then, it exploded.

With my sword still in the motion of the technique I had executed, I ceased movement. The indication of experience points, twice that of the wild boar, being added floated into view. The battle took approximately forty seconds. If I were to continue this pace, I should be able to attain a fairly decent level of efficiency.

With the drawn sword in my right hand lowered, I surveyed my surroundings. Close to the limit of my searching range, several Little Nepent cursors arose. Those yet unseen by players.

Before others catch up to these hunting grounds, I must level up as much as I possibly can. With such vigor that the POP of the area will reach the

point of exhaustion. That would be such a high level of egotism that it couldn't be marveled at, even if I do say so myself, but it wasn't time for the hypocrisy of a philanthropic solo player.

Having listlessly settled on my next prey, I started running into the deep forest once more.

Keeping it up for fifteen minutes, over ten Little Nepents were already slaughtered.

Unfortunately, one with a flower attached had yet to appear. In this there is a «real luck-dependency», as referred to in gamer lingo—in other words, it is reliant on the factor of luck the actual player has. Where quests were concerned there hadn't been many incidents where I'd been blessed with luck as far as I can remember.

Even if it's a source of irritation, players who can boast of their luck, obtaining super rare items with drop rates of 0.00 or so percent, one after another, succeeding in their equipment refinement ten times in a row, and in addition, even getting along well with girls within games; these players certainly do exist. To compete with them, there was no method but to simply earnestly repeat those attempts over and over again. Of course, regarding those attempts, I meant the rare items. I have absolutely no intention of spamming greetings whenever I meet with any girls.

In the first place, due to what Kayaba - who could be considered a god - had done, the avatars in-game were presently matched to their appearances in reality, and the population of female players in Aincrad must have taken a sharp dip. It was helpful that one would have no need to doubt if the other party was actually a male «inside», but it must have been quite an ordeal for those intending to take up the role-play of a girl, choosing a name and initial equipment befitting of that. I can do nothing but hope that Kayaba had prepared a name changing item, quest or something of that sort, for their sake...

Perhaps due to being ahead of schedule, as I thought about such things in a portion of my head, upon defeating the eleventh plant monster, a light fanfare rang out within my hearing. At the same time, a golden light effect wrapped around my body. Along with what I had gained from hunting wild boars with Klein beside the city, before the start of the death game, I had finally exceeded the number of experience points needed to level up.

If I were to be playing in a party, calls of "congrats" would probably be springing up from all around in that instant. Instead, while listening to the rustling from the treetops of the old trees ringing out, I stored my sword back into the scabbard on my back. I drew back my index and middle fingers and swiped them downwards, pulling out the main menu window. Switching to the status tab, for the 3 precious status points added, I allocated 1 to Strength, and 2 to Agility. In SAO, where magic does not exist, these two are the only visible statuses, so there was no real need to hesitate. In exchange, a huge number of skills, encompassing all sorts of battle-type and production-type skills are in place—or so it seems; hence, it will likely be a large cause of worry when the number of skill slots eventually increases.

However, on this very day, to survive through this single hour, I have no choice, but to risk my life. Before thinking about the future, I must first ensure that I am adequate, level-wise, for a so-called, «safety margin».

Finishing the status up process, I closed the window, and behind me—

Suddenly, some sort of stiff clapping sound repeatedly rang out.

"...!"

I wildly jumped back, placing my hands onto my sword's handle. Getting absorbed in operating the window while in the field, letting down my guard towards my back was a mistake that even a beginner wouldn't make.

Berating myself as I prepared for battle, what I saw was a being that shouldn't have appeared within this forest, a humanoid monster—no, it was an actual human.

And it wasn't an NPC. It was a player.

A man slightly taller than myself. Around the same age. His defensive equipment were the light leather armor and buckler sold at Horunka Village. His weapon was the same Small Sword from the initial equipment. That said, the sword wasn't exactly drawn. In a stance where his empty hands hit each other in front of his body, he left his mouth agape.

In other words, the clapping sound effect from earlier was the sound of applause from this man—or perhaps boy would be more fitting—for my level up.

After I took a short breath as I lowered my hands, the boy showed an awkward smile, bowing his head down for a moment.

"...S-Sorry, for startling you like that. I should have called out from the start."

".....No, me too... sorry for the overreaction."

Mumbling a reply, I stuffed my hands that had lost their purpose into the pockets of my half coat. The boy, whose features gave a first impression of seriousness, widened his faltering smile, and made some sort of gesture, bringing the fingers on his right hand up near his right eye. As he lowered his hand with embarrassment immediately after, I realized that he definitely wore glasses back in the real world.

"C-Congrats, on your level up. That was pretty quick."

I reflexively lowered my head towards the boy's words. It felt off, as if he had seen through my thoughts of "If I were to be playing in a party" from earlier. I shook my head from side to side in a fluster.

"It's not that fast... —And if you are going to say that, you're fast too. I thought it would be two or three more hours before anyone reached this forest."

"Ahaha, I thought I would be the first to arrive too. The path to get here is rather confusing, after all."

The instant I heard those words, I finally noticed, though belatedly.

He is the same as me.

Not in terms of equipment and gender. Nor as the position of a prisoner in this death game of SAO players.

This boy had as much knowledge as me. The location of Horunka Village. The reason why it was better not to buy a Bronze Sword. In addition, the area with the largest POP of Little Nepents. In other words—he was an «original beta tester».^[13] Just like me.

The world's first VRMMO game, Sword Art Online, officially went online with ten thousand people gathered as players today, on November 6th, 2022. However, three months before that, offered to a mere thousand people through a lottery, was the game's play trial— that is to say, a beta test was carried out.

In that test flooded by tens of thousands of applications, that was the only time I had an unbelievable stroke of real luck (though it could be considered as terribly bad luck by this point in time), by being selected. The test period lasted the whole of August. With the summer vacation allowing it, I continued to full dive from morning to night—though to be accurate, it was from the afternoon to early morning, bustling about Aincrad, which had not yet become a cage of death, in a daze, brandishing my sword, and dying. Over and over again.

Through countless attempts, via trial and error, I accumulated an extensive amount of knowledge and experience.

The small paths and ways of escape not shown on the map. The locations of towns and villages, the stock shops keep. The price and specifications of the equipment sold there. The activation requirements of quests and how to clear them. The spawn areas of monsters, their powers, and also, their weaknesses—

It was due to those bits and pieces of knowledge that I've gotten here alive—deep within a forest far from the Starting City. If I was a complete newbie that did not participate in the beta test, I would likely not even think of leaving the city alone.

The same could be said of the boy standing several meters in front.

There was no doubt the one-handed swordsman with hair slightly longer than mine went through the experience of the beta test just like me. Not just how he knows of the roads of this forest that resembles a maze, but even the stance he adopts as he stands too, shows a familiarization with the original VR engine used by SAO.

The guess that I developed to that extent within several seconds was easily supported by a single phrase from the boy.

"You're doing it too, right? The «Secret Medicine of the Forest» quest."

That was unmistakably the title of the quest I received at the private house in the village earlier. There was no more reason to deny it if he had already read my intentions that far. Upon nodding, he grinned while shifting his hand to those unseen glasses once again.

"That's an indispensable quest to one-handed sword users, after all. When you get that «Anneal Blade» reward, it's good all the way till the third floor's labyrinth."

"...The appearance isn't much to talk about though, that weapon."

As I added that bit in, the boy let out a bright "Ahahaha" laugh. After finally ending that laughter, he opened his mouth after a short pause. What came out were words slightly different from my expectations.

"This is a rare chance, so how about working together on the quest?"

"Eh... I do believe that was an individual-only quest though."

I replied so spontaneously. There are quests that allow all members of a party to clear it by running through it as a party, and those that do not, and the type of this «Secret Medicine of the Forest» belonged to the latter. There was only one of the crucial key item, «Little Nepent's Ovule», hence only one would drop, and even when challenging it as a party, the number of items that need to be collected would end up having to be equal to the number of people involved in the end.

However, the boy gave a smile as though he had predicted my words.

"Well, that might be true, but the rate of a «one with a flower» will increase if the normal ones get hunted down as much as possible. Pushing that to the extremes as a pair is more effective."

It certainly was just as he had said. I couldn't aim for any monsters not by themselves as a solo, but with two, we could go up against two of them at the same time. Along with the advantage of shortening the time spent choosing targets, the number that could be hunted down would increase accordingly—and with that, the chance of one with a flower should similarly increase.

Just as I was about to nod in acceptance, I harshly stiffened my avatar up.

That was because I thought about the right I had to form a party now, after having abandoned that cheerful single-edged sword user, Klein... the first friend I made, just a short hour or so ago.

However, the boy took my hesitation the wrong way, and shook his head in a fluster.

"No, it's fine, you don't have to feel any obligation to form a party. You are the first one who got here, so of course, I'll concede the first key item to you. If we continue hunting at that boosted rate, the second will definitely drop soon, so if you can stick with me till then..."

"Ah... aah, that's right... then, excuse me, but..."

With that incoherent reply, I nodded. If we were to fight as a party, all drops from monsters would go into not our individual storage spaces, but a temporary one instead, so technically, it would be possible for him to make off with the key item for the quest. That was likely what was thought as the source of my misgivings. Although in actual fact, that hadn't even crossed my mind yet, there was no worth in correcting that now.

Towards my assent, the boy laughed once again, before he stepped up and offered his right hand.

"That's good to hear; well then, I'll be in your care for the time being. I am «Coper»."

If he was originally a beta tester like me, it wouldn't be odd if I knew him previously, but I had no recollection of that name.

Of course, there was the chance that he might be using a different name from during the beta period, and in the first place, his name wasn't displayed on his color cursor, so it couldn't even be confirmed if that was his «real name». Similarly, I could use a false name as well. However, I am awful with character naming, so for me, having used a simple abbreviation of my real name in the various net games I've played thus far, there was no way I could do something like making up a false name in an instant.

"...Do treat me well. I am «Kirito»."

Upon giving my name, the boy—Coper lightly tilted his head to the side.

"...Kirito... eh, just where did I..."

Somehow, it seems that the other party knew me indirectly from the beta period. Reflexively thinking that it might have a negative effect, I immediately spoke out.

"That's probably someone else. Come on, let's get hunting. We have to get two «ovules» before the other players get here."

"Y...Yea, that's right. Let's go for it."

Nodding to each other, we targeted a couple of Little Nepents grouped together nearby and dashed towards them.

As expected of an original beta tester, Coper's sense for battle was nothing to scoff at.

He knew quite a bit about the distance to keep away while using a one-handed sword, the behavior monsters exhibit, and the usage of sword skills. In my opinion, he was focusing slightly too much on defense, but that was only understandable in this situation. We naturally settled into a routine with good synergy, with Coper first luring the target, then me striking at its weak point with all my might, reducing our prey into polygon fragments one after another as a pair.

The hunting went smoothly, but there was still one large irregularity that came to mind.

Even until now, we did not exchange a single comment about the situation that SAO was currently in. Was Kayaba's proclamation the truth? If we die here, will we really die? Just how will this world turn out from now on...? All of those questions must have occurred to Coper as well, but there was no talk of anything beyond items and quests between us, from the start to the very end. And despite that, our conversation truly flowed naturally.

In other words—it must have been because both of us were heavy MMO addicts. Even if the world were to change into a death game, even if the log out button were to disappear, as long as we are in the game, it's the time for quests and experience earning. We are likely beyond help now, but thinking back on it, Coper too, went to the extent of applying for the beta test as well, so there was no question that his very core was that of a net gamer. To put it simply, beyond the fear of death, we merely prioritized our urge to strengthen our characters...

No.

No, that's not it.

Surely, both Coper and I are still unable to look reality in the eye yet.

Leveling up efficiently; exhausting the POP rate; even if we go through these near-sighted calculations, our thoughts on the foundation are still in suspension. We averted our sight away from the reality of the Nerve Gear discharging high intensity electromagnetic waves, frying our brains upon our HP reaching zero, and as an avenue of escapism, simply aimed for what was «ahead» without prior consideration. Comparatively, the players who remained in the Starting City could even be said to be significantly more calm in their understanding of the situation.

However, if that was so—

The fact that I was going up against dreadful monsters like this right now, fighting on my absolute own free will, would mean that I certainly was unable to comprehend the current reality. Unaffected by the anxiety of dying for real being the entire basis for why I am still able to dodge these pointed vines and dangerous corrosive fluids capable of killing me off, with the slightest of movements.

The instant I realized that, a premonition came to me.

Aah... in the near future, I'll definitely die.

«An actual death», in other words, the first rule of a death game; to not understand that rule, was to not look out for the line that one must not cross. It was no different from walking at the edge of a cliff in the midst of darkness, entrusting all to fate. Thinking back on it, exiting the city on my own, stepping into this forest area with poor vision, was already a deed at the extremes of foolhardiness...

Gulp! An intense chill ran down my spine, going all the way to the tips of my hands and feet, putting a stop to my avatar's movement.

At that exact moment, I aimed at the Little Nepent—just how many I had already downed I do not know—and swung my sword towards its weak point; if I had been frozen stiff for even half a second more, I would have definitely received a painful counter in return.

Coming back to my senses, the re-activated sword skill, «Horizontal», sliced off the plant's stalk in my precarious situation. A shattering sound rang out, and formless glass-like flakes passed through me, scattering into the air.

At my back, battling another Nepent, was Coper, who fortunately seemed to have not noticed my abnormal behavior. Slower by five seconds and annihilating the enemy without any usage of skills, he turned around with a sigh.

".....It's still not out..."

His voice was tainted with traces of fatigue as expected. Over an hour had passed since he started fighting as a team with me. Although close to over a hundred and fifty Nepents must have been taken down by the two of us already, the POP of the «one with a flower» had yet to occur.

To shake off the chills that have yet to cease reverberating throughout my frame, I gave my shoulders a firm jerk.

"It could be that the rate at which it appears was changed since the beta period... It's not like it's the first time I've heard of a MMO that lowered the rate of rare drops after it officially went online..."

"...That's true... —So, what now? We did manage to level up considerably, and the durability levels of our weapons have dropped by quite a bit, so returning to town for the time being might..."

When Coper reached that point in his speech, a faint red light came to life under a tree, a mere ten meters or so away from us.

Rough and unevenly-shaped polygon blocks were rendered, connecting to each other, forming a fuzzy image. It was a sight I was used to—the POP of a monster.

As Coper mentioned earlier, we have gained quite a lot of experience points with the «excess farming» we've done until now, with both of us reaching level 3. The level suitable to clear the first floor was around 10, from what I could recall of the beta period, so although it was still too early to proceed onwards, there was already no need to scramble for every single Little Nepent around. The color of the enemies' color cursors were also changing from magenta to red.

"....."

The two of us stood still on the grassy patch, and continued absentmindedly gazing at the spawning. Within several seconds, the Nepent, number one hundred and several tens, received a distinct appearance of its own, setting out on its path with its vines coiling about. A lustrous green stalk, the proof that it's alive; an unique speckled pattern adorning its prey-trapping mechanism; and above that—glistening a toxic red even beneath this dismal lightning, an enormous flower that resembled a tulip.

"....."

We remained watching that creature for several more seconds in a daze, before silently turning to each other.

".....——!!"

A muted war cry. Swinging our individual swords forth, with a vigor much like that of a cat assailing a mouse, we charged towards the «flower attached one» that had finally appeared and—

Right before that, I did an emergency brake with both feet while restraining Coper who was beside me with my left hand.

Why!? And as he turned towards me with that written on his face, I first flicked out the index finger on my left hand to grab his attention, then pointed it at what laid beyond the «flower attached one» far away.

It was hard to see, obstructed by many trees, but the shadow of another Nepent was visible in that direction. Spotting it was thanks to the searching skill and my slightly improved proficiency at it. Perhaps due to not taking up the searching skill yet, Coper had to strain his eyes through the darkness of the forest, taking several seconds before finally appearing to have confirmed it by sight.

If the Nepent beyond the one with a flower was a normal one, there would be no reason to hesitate in attacking. But of all the absurd timings it could have appeared at, a big lump just had to be right above that second prey-trapping mechanism, gently swaying back and forth.

If that were to be a flower as well, I would have no choice but to retract the proclamation of my «low real luck». That said, what was dangling on the end of the slender stalk of the second one, was a spherical ball with a diameter of around twenty centimeters—a «seed». If even a trifling graze was inflicted onto that, swelling out as though it could burst open any moment, it would immediately rupture and cause foul fumes to spread out. Those fumes would draw in swarms of rampaging Nepents, doubtlessly plunging us into peril from which we could not hope to escape, even with higher levels.

Just what should we do.

I was lost. There was the possibility of defeating the «one with a seed» without hurting the seed with my combat capabilities. However, that was not definite. If there was even the slightest chance of death, it would be best to be patient and wait until the ones with the flower and seed are separated, far away from each other.

However, there was a single rumor I heard during the beta period that added to my dilemma. Regarding the Little Nepent «with the flower», a precious, rare monster that drops the key item for a quest, if left alone

without hunting it down, it would change into the extremely dangerous trap monster, the «one with a seed»... or at least, that's what I heard back then.

It was not impossible; or rather, it certainly was a plausible tale. Even while looking on from these bushes, the petals of the flower on the Nepent, moving about around ten meters ahead, could be seen falling as they fluttered, a perfectly round seed growing out, resulting in a group of two Nepents with seeds when counted with the other one there—or so it might turn out.

"...Just what should we do..."

I murmured thus without thinking. The fact that I faltered here was proof that I had yet to draw the line between danger and safety. In this state of hesitation, falling back seems to be the rational choice, but I have to question my rationality at this current moment.

While I was frozen, as though afflicted by a stun-causing attack, Coper's low whisper reached my ears.

"—Let's go. I'll draw the «one with the seed»'s attention, please finish off the «one with the flower» quick."

And without waiting for a reply, those boots from the initial equipment stepped forth.

".....Got it."

I replied, following behind Coper.

I had yet to resolve my hesitation. I had only put it off. But with this situation advancing, I could do nothing but to shift my focus onto this sword and avatar. If I was unable to handle even that, I would really die.

The one with the flower was the first to notice Coper's approach, twirling its body around. "Shaaaaa!", the borders of the prey-trapping mechanism, appearing much like the lips of a human being, bellowed out while quivering.

Veering to the right, aiming at the one with the seed further within, Coper still held the attention of the one with the flower. Having gotten closer, I took advantage of the opportunity, brandishing the sword in my right hand, with all doubts thrown to the wind.

Even if it was a rare monster with an appearance rate of lower than one percent, the Nepent with a flower had stats barely any different from the normal ones. Its defense and attack were slightly higher, but that deviation meant nothing to me, having gotten to level 3 after over an hour of hunting.

Even with all these doubts lingering in my mind, the accumulated experience of battles from the beta period made my avatar move instinctively, evading attacks from the Nepent's vines by parrying and stepping aside, piling up counterattacks one after another. Its HP gauge turned yellow in ten seconds, and I started up a sword skill to finish it off after a single jump backwards.

With the increase in my one-handed straight sword proficiency through the numerous battles, it felt like the activation speed and range of skills have also increased. When the Nepent attempted to spew out its corrosive fluids, before managing to inflate its prey-trapping mechanism even halfway, its fleshy stalk was sliced apart by the blue arc of the single-hit «Horizontal» letting out a creaking sound.

The shriek that echoed out too, was slightly different from the norm. The decapitated pitcher portion spun as it dropped to the ground, scattering away as polygons—but before that, the flower at the top of its head fell down delicately.

A fist-sized ball, shining faintly, tumbled out from its insides. The thing rolled all the way to my feet, and just as it touched the tips of my boots, the Nepent's trunk and prey-trapping mechanism blasted apart, one after another.

I bent my body over, picking up the gleaming sphere—the «Little Nepent's Ovule» with my left hand. In order to obtain this key item, over a hundred and fifty monsters must have been defeated, not to mention getting stuck in that state of indecision over one thing or another.

As that came to my mind, I got the desire to idly sit down in some meadow, but it was still far too early to release this tension. I had to back up Coper, who was taking the responsibility for drawing the attention of the dangerous «one with a seed» a short distance away.

"Sorry for the wait!"

Shouting out as I lifted my head, I dropped the ovule in my left hand into the belt pouch on my waist. It would honestly give me more relief if I opened up the window and stored it in my storage space, but it was not the

time to leisurely operate it like so. I restored my grip onto my sword, and ran several steps—

For some reason, my feet appeared to have stopped all by themselves.

I didn't understand it too. Just right ahead, the partner that I unexpectedly gained, Coper, was skillfully handling the Nepent's assaults with his sword and buckler. Perhaps because he specialized in defense from the start, it seemed that he had enough control to face this way, even in the midst of battle. Giving off an aura of seriousness, with slightly narrowed eyes, he stared into me—with those eyes.

Something in his gaze caused my feet to halt.

What was it? Why was Coper looking on me with those eyes? As if they were filled with distrust, or possibly pity.

Strongly fending off the Nepent's vine attack with the buckler, as Coper broke off the bout, he delivered a short line while looking at me, who was standing stock still.

"Sorry, Kirito."

And he returned his sight to the monster, forcefully raising the sword in his right hand above his head. The blade glistened light blue. A sword skill was activated. That motion—was that of the single-hit vertical slash, «Vertical».

"No... that's bad, isn't it..."

Even with the confusion caused by the earlier statement, I murmured so with my mind numb.

The upper portion of the stalk, a weak point of the Little Nepent, was obstructed by its sturdy prey-trapping mechanism, and as such, vertical attacks are ineffective. Additionally, there was a clear reason why Coper should not be using a vertical slash now. He should also be well aware of that.

However, the sword skill was already beyond the point of no return. The avatar, half taken over by the system assist, kicked the ground savagely, and the glowing blade was driven into the Nepent's prey-trapping mechanism—or at least, what was above it, striking that wobbling, round «seed».

Baaan!

That explosive sound shook the forest at a monstrous volume.

This was the second time I heard this sound. The first was of course, during the beta test period. At that time, the members of my ad hoc party carelessly poked it with a spear, and due to the swarm of Little Nepents attracted by the odor, the four of us at level 2 to 3 died before we could even try to escape.

Coper's «Vertical» that smashed the seed continued, slicing apart the Nepent's prey-trapping mechanism as well, cutting through its HP gauge. The monster soon blew apart, but the vague green fumes left behind in the air and that queer stench that reached my nose did not fade away.

Facing Coper, who had avoided the fumes and jumped aside with vigor, I spat words out in a daze.

"Wh... Why..."

It wasn't an accident. That attack was intentional. Coper slashed that «seed» of his own free will, bursting it open.

The original beta tester who fought alongside me for this one hour repeated himself without looking at me.

"...Sorry."

From the direction of that avatar, I saw a great number of color cursors appearing.

From the right too. From the left too. And also, from the back too. They were the Little Nepents drawn by the fumes. There was no mistake that every one of the individual beings that had POP-ed in this area were gathering, without a single one absent. There were twenty in total... no, there were easily over thirty. It's impossible; the instant I decided that, my feet began to try and escape by their own accord, but that too, was impossible. Even if I were to break through the blockade, the highest movement speed of Nepents was far higher than one would be led to believe from their outer appearance and I would befall the attention of other monsters before I got away. Retreat was no longer possible—

In other words, this was suicide?

Was I dragged along, only to die here? Was Coper crushed under the pressure from the fear of «death in reality», wishing to retire from this death game?

Frozen stiff as I stood there, I wondered vacantly.

However, that guess was in error.

Not bothering to even look at me any further, Coper, with his sword already returned to its scabbard on the left side of his waist, started to run towards a thicket nearby having turning to that direction. There was no hesitation in his movements. He had not given up on living through this yet. However.

"It's futile..."

I squeezed the words that almost couldn't escape out from my throat.

The swarm of Little Nepents was flooding in from all directions. Slipping through any gaps, or cutting a path through with a sword would be difficult, and even if that actually worked, the enemies would impede any attempts to continue. No, in the first place, if Coper intended to escape now of all times, just why did he slice that seed with «Vertical»? Perhaps he planned to die, but lost his nerve upon seeing the huge mass of monsters, and thought of struggling to the bitter end?

I thought through those things in a corner of my mind; over half of it already numb, as I followed behind Coper who dove into a small thicket. With the dense growth of leaves obstructing, his avatar went out of sight, but his color cursor was still displayed as—...

It wasn't. He shouldn't have gotten twenty meters away yet, but Coper's color cursor had vanished from my vision. He might have used a «teleport crystal» to perform an emergency retreat; was what I thought for a moment, but that should not be it. That item was terribly valuable, and there was no way he managed to buy it at the beginning like this, not to mention that the 1st floor had neither shops that sold it, nor monsters that dropped it.

In that case, there was only one answer. The special effects of the «Hiding» skill. Erasing the sight of the color cursor from players, and not drawing the attention of monsters. Coper did not leave the second skill slot empty; he had already taken up the hiding skill. That might have been why when we first met, I did not notice him approaching me from behind...

As I felt the ground quake beneath the groups of monsters gushing forth, I came to that conclusion, and finally—though it was much too slow, I realized.

Coper was not fleeing from a suicide attempt after getting a taste of fear.

He was trying to kill me.

Going to the extent of breaking the «seed», gathering together the Nepents from all around. Followed by concealing his own body with the hiding skill, all by himself. Focusing over thirty monsters' undivided attention onto me, who was incapable of hiding. A truly orthodox *modus operandi*, of how «MPK»^[14] works.

Upon understanding that, his motive was clear as day. He intended to steal the quest key item, «Little Nepent's Ovule», that I picked up just a moment ago. If I were to die, the item would drop right there from within my equipment, or the pouch it was in. After the mass of Nepents have dispersed, Coper could pick up the «ovule», return to the village and clear the quest.

".....So that's it....."

As I set my sight upon the horde of abnormalities, close enough for me to not have to rely on the color cursors any longer, I whispered.

—Coper. He was not escaping from the reality of the situation. It was the opposite. He had already acknowledged the reality of this so-called death game, advancing onto the stage as a proper player. His decision, was to swindle, outwit and rob other players, for the sake of his own life.

Surprisingly, I felt no enmity rise up within me.

Even though I fell right into the trap, and was about to be murdered, curiously enough, my mind was composed. Part of that might have been due to my recognition of that single «hole» existing in Coper's plan.

"...Coper. You don't know about it, do you?"

I had no idea if he could hear me, but I articulated so, in the direction of the thicket a slight distance away.

"This must have been the first time you took up the «hiding» skill. It may be a useful skill, but it's not quite bulletproof. Against monsters that rely on

senses aside from sight, it's not very effective. For example, something like a Little Nepent."

Rampaging as they assembled, a cluster of the predatory plants storming in like an avalanche were clearly heading towards the thicket Coper was hidden in. He must have noticed how he constantly drew attention despite hiding by now. That was the exact reason why I took up searching over hiding.

Feeling calmer than ever, I turned towards the rear, and laid my eyes onto the ranks of Nepents rushing in from there. The enemies from behind will be assailing Coper, so it's fine to leave them alone for now. Before the situation concludes behind, if I were to annihilate those in front, there might just be a chance to return alive. Of course, the odds of that were one to ten thousand though.

Despite death approaching close enough to graze me, I am still unable to face it as reality, and took up my Small Sword as I always did. Its durability was depleted from the hundred and tens of battles it went through till now, with chips and scratches everywhere on its blade. If I were to wield it roughly, it might even break apart during this battle.

Reducing the number of slashes to the minimum. Hitting exactly below the enemies' prey-trapping mechanism, their weak point, with a «Horizontal» at full boosted power as I kicked off and swung my arm, I slaughtered each in one blow. If I wasn't capable of doing that at the very least, it was certain that the worst manner of death would greet me when I lose my armaments.

I heard the sounds of the monsters' howls and attacks from behind, as well as Coper, who seemed to be shouting something.

But I turned back no more, and focused all my senses on the foes I was up against.

The few minutes since then—or perhaps the few tens of minutes since then, I had no proper recollections of any details from that period, even after the passing of much time.

I lost most of my logical thinking. All I was aware of, were the enemies before me, that plain sword, and the flesh guiding it—or to be accurate, it was only the motion commands issued by my brain.

Predicting the types and trajectories of the attacks coming from the monstrosities by their motions, avoiding those with minimum movement, countering by sinking a sword skill in. With what I had done in the battles up till now, with the inefficiencies in the motions ironed out, my precision increased.

In SAO, «unavoidable magic attacks» do not exist. As a result, theoretically, if a player's sense of judgment and reaction were ridiculously high, it would be possible to dodge any and every attack without pause. That said, I don't have that much skill as a player, and there's way too many enemies, so some sort of flawless execution would not happen. Vines stretched out from all four directions, grazing me and drops of the corrosive fluids hurled at me made holes in my leather coat one after another. While my HP gauge was whittled down as time passed, my virtual, actual «death» took another step closer.

However, I narrowly avoided any direct hits, and continued to swing my sword.

If I were to suffer from even a half second delay due to a direct hit, it would lead to a stream of consecutive blows that will not cease until my death. Just which will happen first: damage shaving my HP down to zero, or getting my movement arrested and dying in an instant?

During the beta test period, no, even before that, within the numerous MMO games I played, I had fallen into such desperate situations countless times. At times like those, after making a slight attempt at escaping my doom, I would think about how annoying it was to recover from the death penalty, or maybe how it would be nice if my weapon didn't drop at least, as I sat back and waited for my HP to fall to zero.

If I wished for a «sense of reality» in this world, I would just have to do that now. At the very least, I would be able to find out whether Kayaba's declaration was the truth, or a malicious prank.

It felt like a small voice whispered that within my mind. But I ignored it, and continued decapitating the heads of the endlessly appearing Nepents with naught but «Slants» and «Horizontals».

Because I didn't want to die? Well, that's for sure.

But, there was one other thing; some other motive spurring me on to fight. At this very moment, forcibly warping the shape of my mouth—something was changing its form into one that could even be considered a smile.

This is it, was what I thought.

This is SAO. Despite having dived in for over two hundred hours in the beta test, I was completely unable to perceive the true essence of this game named SAO. I haven't been fighting for an actual cause.

The sword was not simply an item classified as a weapon, and the body was not simply an object capable of motion. When synchronized with one's consciousness to the upmost limits, in that moment it all came together, there was a new phase that I could reach. I was only able to catch a glimpse of the entrance to that world still. I want to know what lies ahead. I want to keep moving ahead.

"U... oooooaaa!!"

I howled, and kicked off the ground.

A «Horizontal», leaving behind even its own light effect, swung out and caused the prey-trapping mechanism of two Nepents, lined up in a file, to soar ever higher.

Immediately after, from a location slightly away at my back, a remarkably sharp sound rang out fleetingly with a *Kashaaan!*

It was distinctively different from the sound of a monster blowing up into scattered fragments. A effect that heralded a player's death.

Coper, who was surrounded by over ten of them, had finally expended all of his energy.

".....h!!"

I started to turn around by reflex, but resisting that, I slaughtered the last two around me, one after another.

Then I finally turned behind.

The Nepents who killed off their first target directed their bloodlust towards me. Their numbers accounted to seven. That would make it over five of them that Coper managed to drive off in that situation. The reason why he did not scream aloud in his final moments was most likely not due to lacking the composure to do so, but due to the pride he held as an original beta tester.

".....Good work."

Mouthing the standard line in response to those «logging out» of net games, I brandished my now corroded sword right before me. It could have even been possible to escape from this situation right now, but that thought didn't even occur to me.

Of the seven Nepents who caught sight of their new prey and were rushing in, a deep red «flower» just had to be blooming right at the top of the prey-trapping mechanism belonging to the one leading.

If only he didn't try to kill me through MPK, and just worked hard at it for a little longer, Coper would have gotten his very own «ovule» as well. But, there was no purpose in saying that now. These were the consequences of those actions. That was all.

My HP gauge was lower than forty percent, and would enter the critical red area soon, but I entertained thoughts of death no more. I sensed the two on the right side within those seven initiating the motion for their corrosive fluid spray, dashed there with all my might, and used a single shot to take care of the enemies who were stuck charging up.



I brought down the remaining five in the next twenty-five seconds, and the battle was over.

On the spot where Coper was obliterated, his Small Sword and Buckler laid fallen. Both were worn out, much like my sword.

He had fought on this Floating Castle Aincrad for several hours, and then, died. To be exact, his HP went to zero, and his virtual body was scattered. However, there was no means to check if that unknown somebody, in a street of the real Japan, lying down in a house somewhere, who manipulated that avatar had really died. All I could do, was bid farewell to this swordsman named Coper.

After thinking briefly, I picked up the sword, and thrust it deep into the roots of the biggest tree around. Next, I placed the «ovule», that dropped from the second one with a flower, onto that root.

"Here's yours, Coper."

I murmured, and stood up. Items left on the ground would have their endurance gradually decrease, eventually vanishing, but it should be able to serve as a gravestone marker for several hours.

With my back turned towards it, to return to the village, I began walking on the path heading east.

Even though I witnessed the death of the partner who deceived me, and faced death myself, while barely living through by the skin of my teeth, the «sense of reality of this death game» that I held was as flimsy as always. But at the very least, the urge to get stronger had increased compared to before. Not for the sake of staying alive, but to understand the limits of sword techniques in SAO, though others would likely not understand that desire.

Perhaps due to the POP drying up from the duo's overly excessive hunting, I arrived back at Horunka without encountering any monsters.

The time was—nine o'clock at night. From the end of Kayaba's tutorial, three hours have already passed.

As expected, I could see several players in the village's plaza. They were probably original beta testers as well. At this rate, only those with experience from the beta test would proceed onwards, and a gap might

eventually form between them and a great many of those without that experience... but that was not something I had the right to be worried over.

I had no desire to converse with others right now, so before the other players noticed me, I went through the alleyways, and headed for the inner portion of the village. Fortunately, the NPCs' behavior patterns seemed to have yet to progress into their late night versions, so the window of the house I headed for was still lit with an orange glow.

Striking the knocker for courtesy's sake, and then opening the door, the missus turned around, with something simmering on the stove as always. Floating above her head was the golden «!» that denoted a quest in progress.

Stepping up to her, from inside the pouch on my waist, I took out a sphere faintly shining light green—the «Little Nepent's Ovule» and handed it over.

The missus's face lit up, looking as though she was twenty years younger in an instant, and accepted the ovule. As she babbled on with words of gratitude, the quest log at the left of my vision updated.

Gently putting the ovule into the pot, the missus, who now appeared to be a young wife, walked over to a large chest placed at the south of the room, and opened its lid. From inside, she quietly took out a long sword in a red scabbard, and though it seemed decrepit, it gave off a presence entirely different from that of the initial equipment. Returning before me, she held out the sword with both hands, along with words of gratitude once again.

"...Thanks."

I murmured that single word, and accepted it. My right hand could feel its evident weight. The sensation it gave off was five times that of the Small Sword. The sword that really served me well even during the beta test—this «Anneal Sword»; It would take some practice to get used to it once again.

The quest completion message floated in the middle of my vision, the bonus experience points added, and my level got to four.

The old me would have burst out of the village, full of spirit, swinging my new sword at the «Large Nepent» enemies that appeared deep in the forest to the west.

But I totally didn't feel up to that at the moment, and after storing the new sword in my storage space, I sat down on a chair close by with a thud.

The quest was already completed, so the young wife won't even offer a glass of water. With her back turned to me, she was stirring the simmering pot on the stove once more.

As surges of fatigue finally washed over me, I absentmindedly continued to watch over the NPC's behavior. I wonder just how long I stayed that way. Within my vision, the young wife took out a wooden cup from the shelves, and filled it with the pot's contents using a ladle.

Holding the steaming cup with both hands earnestly, with significantly more care than the sword earlier, she walked towards the door in the interior.

I stood up without any real reason and followed behind the wife. The NPC that opened the door stepped towards a dimly lit room. If I'm not mistaken, during the beta period, when I tried to open this door by myself, it turned out to be locked by the system. Despite lingering hesitations, I too, stepped over the edge.

Within was a small bedroom. It was furnished with a dresser by the wall and a bed by the window, along with a single small chair.

And, lying on the bed was a girl, who looked to be seven or eight years of age.

The paleness on her face was apparent even under the moonlight. Her neck was thin too, with bony shoulders peeking out from the sheets.

Upon noticing her mother, the girl lifted her eyelids slightly, and next—she looked at me. Eeh, as I stood stock still with that thought, those lips, lacking in color, formed into a faint smile.

The mother reached out with her right hand, propping up the girl's back. That instant, the girl's body bent over, gripped by a coughing fit. Those light brown braids shook weakly over the back covered in a white negligee.

I checked the color cursor displayed near the girl once more. The NPC tag was unmistakably attached to it. Her name was «Agatha». That would be pronounced as Ah-ga-tha, I guess.

While stroking the girl—Agatha's back gently with her right hand, the mother sat down on the chair by the side, and spoke.

"Agatha. Here, the traveling swordsman got some medicine for you from the forest. If you drink this, you'll get better for sure."

And, she made the girl take a hold of the cup that her left hand held.

"...Okay."

Agatha nodded with a cute voice, and holding on to the cup with her small hands, she gulped it down.

A brilliant golden light poured out with a *Paa* sound effect, color instantly returned to her face, and the girl jumped out from her bed and started running around—nothing of that sort happened. However, as Agatha lowered the cup, it might be just me, but I thought a slight tinge of red returned to her cheeks.

Returning the now empty cup to her mother, Agatha returned her gaze to me as I was frozen on that spot, and grinned.

Her lips moved, her somewhat stuttering words flowed out like demure jewels.

"Thank you, onii-chan."

".....Ah..."

Without being able to give a proper answer, my two eyes opened wide as that sound escaped.

In the past——

In the far off past, it felt like something like this had happened.

My sister... Suguha caught a cold, and stayed in bed. My father was appointed overseas as always and my mother was unable to cancel a trip that she had to make to the company, hence I was in charge of nursing her for a mere two hours. That was, during elementary school... just which grade was it in? Honestly, I did think of it as a little bothersome, but I didn't leave her alone to go play, and wiped down Suguha's sweat, changing the cooling patch on her forehead.

When I did that, that girl suddenly said that she wanted to drink some ginger tea.

I reluctantly called up my mother, and asked for its recipe. It just needed ginger extract and honey to be dissolved in hot water, a procedure more

simple than even cookery in Aincrad if done carelessly, but to me who had never even dabbled in cooking, it was of an extremely high difficulty. After carrying the ginger tea, made while getting my own fingers grated when I used the grater, to Suguha's bedside, that girl who was usually full of spiteful language, looked up to me with a meek face——

".....Uu...gh....."

All of a sudden, those sounds issued involuntarily from my throat.

I want to meet up with them.

I want to meet up with Suguha, with my mother, with my dad.

The overtly intense urge pierced through my avatar, causing me to stumble, and my two hands landed onto Agatha's bed. I lowered my knees onto the bedding like that, gripping onto the white sheets tightly, and those coarse sounds slipped out from me yet again.

I want to meet up with them. But that was not something that could be allowed. After all, the multiple electric fields let out by the Nerve Gear severed my consciousness from the real world completely, imprisoning me within this world.

While holding down the sobs that my mouth was bent on gushing out, I felt like I had finally understood the situation I was in. The «truth» of this world.

It was not just about dying or living. There was no way I could have truly experienced anything like «death» in the first place. After all, even in the real world—one like this one, a «world where dying really means death», I have never felt the presence of death close by.

Rather, it was the fact that this is a «parallel world». That I can't meet with the people I want to. That is, the one and only truth. That is the «reality» of this world.

Hiding my face deep within the sheets, I clenched my teeth as my entire body continued to tremble. There were no tears. No, they might be flowing down the cheeks of my real body made from flesh and blood while it lied on my bed in the real world. Possibly, even in front of Suguha, watching over me from the side.

".....What's the matter, onii-chan?"

Hearing that voice, a soft palm nervously touched my head.

That hand soon started stroking my hair awkwardly. Over and over again.
Until I cried myself out, that small hand never stopped moving.

(End)

Afterword

This is Kawahara Reki. Thank you very much for reading 『Sword Art Online 8 Early and Late』 .

This is another compilation of side stories after volume 2. As the title says, it is the records of the latest story of SAO world (to be accurate, in chronological order, it was about a week before volume 7 『Mother's Rosario』) and the earliest story of SAO world (this too, to be accurate, happened an hour after chapter 1 of volume 1 『Aincrad』 <Laugh>).

Readers who had followed from volume 1 (or from the web version) would already know, that this SAO story happened two years after the start of the death game «Sword Art Online», the incident at about three weeks before the game was cleared was written first. After that, even though I wrote four side stories of the past episodes in volume 2, but I actually at a loss at the news that the SAO would get published into a Dengeki Bunko version. I thought if I shouldn't publish the web version as it was, but rewrite the large portion of the scripts in volume one and two, by carefully filling the gap between the start and the clearing of the death game.

Of course, even though those thoughts had already ended (the reason was mainly due to the fear of having to write enormous amount of pages <Laugh>), but inside me, the figure of «Kirito after separated with Klein at the Starting City» had been smoldering for years. From the former β tester, he who full sprinted along the shortest course to become stronger, what kind of feeling he had kept within his heart, I want to follow along with him — that sort of feeling was left in me without disappearing.

At the time I decided to put the two stories which had been published on the web (『A Murder Case in the Area』 and 『Caliber』) in this eighth volume, 'Then why not writing that day story, when Kirito ran out into the wilderness in addition!' After thinking so, I wrote 『First Day』 . Come to think of it, it is now close to ten years after writing the first story of SAO, there may be some fluctuations in Kirito's figure, if you are enjoying it including those, I'll be very happy.

From here on, if the chance arises, I feel like to write about when Kirito obtained his very first beloved sword and challenged the first floor capture. Please wait patiently!

Now this is the custom 'I'm sorry corner'..... About 『A Murder Case in the Area』 in this volume, I'm sad to say, there were inconsistencies from what described in volume one (for example, in volume one, Kirito recalled that 『He had never entered an NPC restaurant with Asuna before』 but it was exactly that in this volume.....). For a moment, I was puzzled if I should make a temporary excuse that it was a player's shop, but I stopped before getting the conclusion. Others are "Huh?" feelings here and there, for those, I beg for your forgiveness as the work came after the various complicated processes.

Next is an apology again, 『A Murder Case in the Area』 which borrowed the trick and solution part from the mystery format, I think the mystery fans may angrily said "There wasn't any!" As someone who loves to read mystery novel, I had an impulse to challenge it, but I'm sorry for my inadequacy! I'm training to correct it and one day I think I'll challenge it again.

Then, this is no longer an apology but an advertising, this book tells the «Quest success part» of 『Caliber』, the IF expansion of the «Failure part» will be published in the June 2011 issue of the Dengeki Bunko Magazine. If you have a chance, I think it'd be one or two times more enjoyable!

The one responsible for the publishing, Miki-san, who already was mega-busy during the moving of the editorial department, had additional giga-trouble as I forgot to submit the afterword; the illustrator abec-san, who tera-worked hard for the serialization schedule in June and August; this time I also thank you very much! Then to every readers, please continue your support in volume nine which will be the start of the big fourth arc!

A certain day in May 2011, Kawahara Reki

References

1. ↑ Old tabletop RPG thing, for example if someone cast a death spell on you, and your dice roll won, you won't die.
2. ↑ ALO term for **Metamorphosis**
3. ↑ MMORPG game term, POP: Contraction of Repopulation, often used as a shortened term for the re-spawn of monsters where some of the respawned monsters are more profitable or opportune for players to kill first.
4. ↑ PvP stands for Player vs Player (ie: battles where players are pitted against one another)
5. ↑ Commonly known as Urd or Urth, one of the three Norns in Norse mythology.
6. ↑ The king of Jötunheimr, known as Thrymr or Thrym in plain English.
7. ↑ Or Wayland the Smith, is a legendary master blacksmith in Norse mythology.
8. ↑ Odin.
9. ↑ Asgard.
10. ↑ Þjazi (anglicized as Thiazi, Thjazi, Tjasse or Thiassi) was a son of the giant Olvaldi, brother of giants Idi and Gangr, and the father of Skaði. His most notable misdeed was the kidnapping of the goddess Iðunn.
11. ↑ Verdandi or Verthandi, meaning "happening" or "present" in old Norse.
12. ↑ The latter was written キャリバー (kyaribaa) which was used throughout the entire SAO series as the strongest sword in ALO as well as this story's title, the first one was written カリバー (karibaa) just like in King Arthur's sword Excalibur, even native Japanese could be confused with the two thus what they are discussing in this chapter.
13. ↑ Beta Testers are those who test a program or game for bugs. Beta Testers are always people who up till that point were not involved with the development of the program or game. This is because there are some bugs that people who are familiar with the program might have overlooked. Beta Testers can find those bugs because of their fresh experience with the program or game.

14. ↑ Monster Player Kill. As the name suggests, using neutral monsters to kill players.

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Story : Reki Kawahara
Illustrator : abec

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